

SHARK ISLAND

Perry Pearson

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What this Story is about :

Sixteen-year-old John Mayne, who has lived at sea since the age of ten, and Plumley, a member of the crew, are the only survivors of the hurricane-stricken *Connemara*, belonging to John's uncle. They are picked up by the S.S. *Mona*, a ship well-known in the central American seas for her redoubtable owner, Captain Todd, who takes on John and Plumley as additional officer and crew.

John, liking and respecting his new captain, finds that the ship has been chartered by an unpleasant individual named Price; the purpose of this charter, the mysterious Mr. Smith they meet at their destination, a brush with the police in Panama and with the American Navy at sea—all these are bound up with the treasure lying in the lagoon of Shark Island.

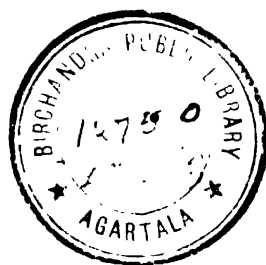
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Parry Pearson

SHARK ISLAND

A Story of Sea Adventure



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CHAPTER I

THE ONLY SURVIVORS

THE S.S. *Mona* slowly threaded her way through the shipping at the Panama end of the Canal and then dropped her pilot. Captain Todd, standing in a wing of his bridge, waved a hand to the departing boat and called to his waiting quartermaster at the wheel: "Half ahead both!"

The telegraph tinkled its message to the engine-room and a moment later came back the answering clang from below. The Captain yawned, stretched his massive shoulders, and turned to walk towards the wheel when the sudden, deep blast of a ship's siren almost made him jump. He turned back towards the direction of the noise and raised his binoculars.

"Ha-hm! Now, I wonder——Stop both!" The stolid quartermaster at the wheel rang off the engines at the curt order.

"Now what's the matter? Why are we stopping again, Captain Todd?" An irate voice preceded a bad-tempered expression as a white-clad civilian walked from the deck-house behind the bridge..

"Because the destroyer across the bay has my number at the top of her hoist," explained Captain Todd.

"Destroyer? But—but—we can't be stopped like this. I don't want any warship messing about with us. You know that." The voice was blustering, but the Captain took no notice. The affirmative signal had been hoisted in reply to the destroyer, and while the ship rolled idly in the swell the Captain through his glasses watched a power-launch being manned.

"Can't we get away? I don't like this."

"Mr. Price, that ship can travel at thirty-six knots to our twelve, and she carries a useful number of guns. There's nothing to worry about, so why not go below for a while? The Canal Zone is under American protection, so one of their destroyers has every right to speak us if she so desires."

"I don't like it, all the same. What does she want?"

"Probably the loan of a box of matches." The Captain grinned unkindly as he made his way to the main deck to meet the approaching launch.

Mr. Price, tall, slim and bronzed to the colour of the Captain, ignored the advice to go below and stayed in the chart-house which opened on to the bridge. The S.S. *Mona*, which he had chartered for a month, had been a crack yacht in her time, but she was now over twenty years old and had seen much service during that period. Six hundred tons, and fitted with twin screws, oil-fired turbines, she had been designed for fifteen knots, but her present speed lay at something under twelve. She was

well-known in the Gulf, the Caribbean Sea, and South American ports, by reason both of her beautiful yacht-like lines and of Captain Todd's name.

The afternoon sun blazed down and seemed to reflect off the sea as though it were made of concrete. As the ship idly rolled from side to side, there seemed not a breath of air. The Captain heaved his great bulk up the port ladder and rang his engines full speed ahead. Within seconds the whirr of the turbines could be heard and the ship slowly moved ahead. Mr. Price left the chart-house and stood behind the Captain, waiting to ask the result of the recent conversation.

Captain Todd took a bearing on Cape Mala, gave the quartermaster his course, then stepped aside to light a cigar. The whirr of the turbines was gradually rising to a low, distant whine as further steam was fed to the blades.

"Well, what was it all about?"

Todd took a few strong pulls at the cigar before answering.

"Nothing to worry about, sir. Just a friendly visit from an officer I knew during the war."

"Oh, and do you think I pay you double your normal wages to partake in friendly visits?" sneered Price. Captain Todd was five feet ten compared with the other's six feet one, but in bulk and in force of character he was far greater than Price.

"I don't usually discuss stupid questions, mister,

but, seeing that you are the present owner of this ship, I'll give you an answer. You pay double wages because you're engaged in some shady business; and, for the first part of your question, I was ordered to stop."

They had moved away from earshot of the helmsman, and were leaning over the bridge rail. The chartering of the *Mona* had cost Price a great deal of money and the Captain's plain speaking was distasteful.

"I hired this ship as much on your reputation or personality as anything else, and I tell you now that I want no truck with any warships. It's your job from now on to avoid them, not meekly stop your engines at the first signal. Any chicken-hearted youngster with his first command would behave like that. I'm paying for something more than that."

Captain Todd sucked his cigar and sighed.

"Listen, Mr. Price, I take it you've been to sea before? All right, then we can speak the same language. If there had been a chance in a hundred, I'd have ignored that signal, but what would have been the result? The Americans are more touchy about the Canal Zone than the gold in the Federal Bank, and for me to have run for it would have been stupid. By now, that destroyer would have been pumping shells ahead of us, and finally we should have been arrested. Lord knows when we should ever have got clear!"

"Yes, yes, all right, I understand that; but I'm

asking that you take all precautions in future. In other words, earn the money I'm paying by avoiding danger. Tell me," added Price suddenly, "why do you suggest I'm engaged in shady business?"

Todd laughed, then pitched his cigar overboard.

"Mister, I'm not inquisitive and my owner's business is his own."

"That's no answer."

"Very well, sir. There are three reasons. Firstly, you are as jumpy as a rattlesnake; secondly, there's the matter of the double wages; and thirdly, there's the sailing orders."

"What's the matter with them?" asked Price haughtily.

"Nothing wrong, maybe, but you'll allow they're unusual. A vessel is normally chartered from one port to another, but in this case we carry no cargo and sail from Havana to a point in the Pacific some two hundred miles west of Cocos Island. Were you bothered whether I was discussing that very fact with yon destroyer?"

Price gripped the bridge rail hard and his face flushed.

"You're paid to keep your mouth shut."

"There's nothing in the contract to that effect, mister. If you wish to sail under sealed orders I've no objection, but don't expect anything more from me than the contract lays down."

"You're not co-operative, Captain."

"I've nothing to co-operate with, sir; but, as I've said, that's your business. I don't mind buck-

ing the law, but I like to work with my head clear of the sand. You can't ask people to talk to you when they're muzzled."

"You don't understand, Captain, and I'm not quite ready yet to explain everything. When shall we arrive at the place?" Price had calmed down and his tone was less hectoring than before.

"I reckon about four days, given reasonable weather."

"There must be no further delay," said Price.

Mr. Anson, Second Officer, was on watch as night fell. The ship was making steady progress through the calm sea, and the Captain had altered course before leaving the bridge to take them away from the usual steamer tracks. The Pacific Ocean around Panama was a busy place, but only a few miles away from the regular routes, one realised the vast, empty areas. The night air was cool and Mr. Anson stepped inside the chart-house for his bridge coat to slip over his tropical uniform.

"Do you see a reddish light away over the starboard bow, sir?" asked the quartermaster as the officer came back to the bridge. He raised his night glasses and swept the indicated area.

"Yes, you're right, I think, and it could be a red flare."

He moved quickly to the starboard wing of the bridge and switched on the powerful searchlight. Swinging the beam in a wide arc he gazed intently over the bow and then switched off. As they stood in the intense blackness which succeeded the glar-

ing light, an unmistakable flare rose from the sea.

"Starboard two points."

"Starboard, sir." The vessel turned slowly on to her new course and a few minutes later the Second Officer again switched on the searchlight. This time, the beam picked out a grey boat with a signal of some description flying from a short mast. Anson reached for the telegraph and rang the engines to "Slow". Just as he was about to 'phone the Captain, the bell rang in the chart-house. It was the Captain who had forestalled him and now demanded the reason for the slowing of the engines. A few words of explanation passed and then the 'phone rang off.

Three minutes later, Captain Todd was on the bridge, an overcoat covering his pyjamas, while Anson kept the boat in the rays of the searchlight. The skipper took the wheel himself and gradually manœuvred his ship until, at a signal from the bridge, one of the crew threw a line to the boat.

There were only two occupants and one appeared to be a boy. The man, dressed only in pants and singlet, caught the line and drew the boat alongside. A rope-ladder was flung over and the boy, supported from behind by the man, slowly clambered up the rungs. Both appeared to be near collapse, and Anson ran to the scuttle-butt for water. He allowed them only a sip apiece and had some difficulty in snatching the mug back from the clinging hands. Their tongues were swollen from thirst and the lips were cracked.

"Water, more water!" said the boy hoarsely.

"Not for a minute, sonny. You can't go drinking a bucketful just yet."

Todd dipped a cloth in the water, squeezed most of its contents over the youngster's face, then gave him the cloth to suck.

"Get back to the bridge, Mr. Anson, and pick up your course again. You two, help these fellows down to a spare cabin. Remember, they're to have nothing to drink except what they can suck from those cloths."

The two seamen addressed each took an arm and escorted them below.

By morning the survivors presented a very changed appearance. The haggard, scared expression had been replaced by a smile, and a good breakfast with plenty of coffee had worked wonders. The Captain and Price entered the saloon together as the steward was clearing away the dishes.

"So our shipwrecked mariners are recovered?" inquired Todd with a smile as he took a seat.

"Yes, sir, thanks to you," answered the younger of the two. "My name is John Mayne and this is Petty Officer Plumley."

"Ah, and what age and rank might you hold, Mr. Mayne?" The Captain's eyes twinkled amusedly as he spoke.

"I'm sixteen, sir, and officially I'm an apprentice."

"Officially? There seems to be a story behind

that word, but we'll let it pass for the time being. How came you to be in that boat last night?"

Price was taking no part in the conversation, but sat frowning on a seat below a porthole. Captain Todd suddenly realised that an officer is not usually cross-examined in the presence of a lower rating, and although the apprentice had not reached certificated officer's rank he was such in embryo.

"Before you go ahead with your story, perhaps Plumley would find the bo'sun and obtain a new rig from him?"

Plumley took the hint and was thankful to leave the presence of the Captain.

"Now, young man, let's have the story in your own words."

"Does it matter, Captain Todd?" put in Price.

"Yes."

The single word conveyed to John Mayne that all was not well between the Captain and what appeared to be a passenger. He ran a hand through an unruly mass of hair and wondered just how far back he should commence his story.

"Well, sir, I'm an orphan and I've lived at sea with my uncle since I was ten years of age."

"Ten? Bless my soul!"

"You see, sir, the ship, the *Connemara*, belonged to my uncle, and he used to tramp around the world. Having no other relatives, he decided that I must travel with him, and so ever since I was ten I've been something of a sailor."

"Go on, young man. I'm listening."

"Yes, sir, but there's not much to tell. The *Connemara* was struck by a hurricane somewhere off the coast of northern Mexico, and my uncle steered south. That night we lost our propeller."

"Ah, did you, now?" Captain Todd had no difficulty in visualising the scene.

"Out of control, we drifted or were blown across the storm centre and that was the end. I remember being lifted into a boat by Plumley, but then something hit me on the head and I don't remember anything more."

"H'm! I doubt, young man, whether you crossed the hurricane centre. I can't imagine a ship's boat passing through that and being able to live afterwards. Do you know the wind pressure at a hurricane centre?"

"It's reckoned, sir, at a hundred and fifty miles an hour."

Captain Todd raised his eyebrows at the unexpected knowledge, then he reflected that the boy had six years' experience and probably knew as much as most junior officers and more than some.

"When did this happen?"

"On the night of the eighteenth, sir."

"Hm! And this is the twenty-third. I left Panama yesterday and there was no news of the *Connemara*. You know what that means!"

"Yes, sir, I've realised for some time that Plumley and I are probably the only survivors."

"Where was your uncle's home?"

"He hadn't a home, sir."

Todd studied the line of the boy's chin, the broad-set eyes, and open expression

"Oh, then you've only lost one ship to find another. Suppose I sign you on as ship's boy? I can't give you papers of apprenticeship until we reach port, but you can live aft and make yourself generally useful."

John's eyes lit up at the handsome offer. Not many captains would offer a shipwrecked boy a berth aft.

"That's very kind of you, sir."

"Well, you can thank me later; and, meantime, I must rouse out the Chief Engineer to wireless Panama."

"There's no necessity for any wireless, Captain."

Todd turned his head to the porthole whence the objection had been raised.

"And why not, Mr. Price?"

"Bah! I don't want to discuss my business in front of this child." The Captain's mouth stiffened.

"Mr. Mayne is now a member of the afterguard and I'll have my officers respected. What's your objection to wireless?" The words cut across the room.

Price shrugged his shoulders.

"I seem to be nothing more than a confounded passenger!" he retorted. "Send your radio if you must, but don't report our position."

"I had no intention of doing so, but don't you realise that the *Connemara* must have been

reported overdue and plenty of wives or mothers may be anxious?"

Price made no reply but made off to his cabin.

"Do you mean, sir, that you carry no radio operator?" asked John.

"That is so. The few messages that are necessary I send with the aid of the Chief Engineer."

"Then I can earn my breakfast, at least. I'll send the radio for you."

Todd opened his eyes wider. "You can operate a radio machine?"

"Provided it's a standard marine set."

"Come on, then, and let's have a look. I've no idea what it is; but if you mess it up, you'll be hearing something from me."

The tiny radio cuddy lay below the chart-house, and while the skipper carefully wrote out the message on the operator's pad John switched on the dynamo and waited a few moments. It was the standard apparatus as supplied to many small ships, and presented no difficulties. He tested the aerial and adjusted various dials and switches while the Captain looked on suspiciously. Turning up the Panama call-sign the boy reached for the transmitting key, and a moment later Captain Todd knew he was listening to an expert operator. In a third of the time the Chief Engineer would have taken John flashed the message to the world and switched off the dynamo.

"Well, youngster, if it comes to the push, you can always make a living tapping that key. I've

never understood anything about it, and the only use I have for it is to check my chronometers from time to time."

John only grinned but he knew the Captain was highly pleased with the performance.

CHAPTER II

THE SECRET OF THE ISLAND

THAT afternoon John was acting as quartermaster, a position he had filled many times on his uncle's ship. The *Mona* carried no more crew than was necessary and the opportunity of making use of the youngster's skill appealed to Captain Todd. The weather was calm, the ocean deserted, and steering the ship on a compass course was a sinecure. The Captain was taking the watch to give his officers a few hours' relief, but again the necessity of a watch officer that brilliant afternoon was merely formal.

Virtually, John, standing alone on the bridge, controlled the ship while the Captain sat in the chart-house, talking to Price. The afternoon was sultry and one or two of the seamen lay under the shade of an awning. John could hear the conversation quite plainly from the chart-house behind him, but it was only desultory talk. Under twin screws, each running at equal revolutions, the *Mona* almost steered herself, and John was becoming just a little bored when without any warning a violent grinding and shrieking of metal rose from the bowels of the ship.

Instinctively John rang off his engines and



turned a rather white face towards his rear. Captain Todd had leaped out to the bridge and grabbed the bridge telephone.

"Hullo, hullo!" He danced and yelled. "Hullo—yes—this is me speaking. What in the name of all that's—— What! You can't hear? Why the devil don't you listen?"

There was a slight pause and then the voice roared again, as though shouting through a megaphone. "Engine trouble? Of course, it's engine trouble. Any fool knows that! What? All right, and be sure you have a good story!"

The 'phone was violently crashed on to its hook and then he glared at John and Price as though holding them responsible.

"Now what's wrong, Captain?" asked Price.

"There's some slight trouble in the engine-room, mister, but nothing to worry about. The Chief will be up in a few minutes with a preliminary report." After the first burst of fury through the 'phone, Todd had recovered his usual equanimity and John suspected that his temper had been more tried with the instrument than with the accident.

"But can't we proceed on the other engine? Surely, they haven't both broken down?"

John was forced to grin at the petulant tone of the thwarted Price.

"Maybe, mister, when we hear from the Chief."

Price paced up and down the bridge, while John stood by the useless wheel and watched the

steamer fall off her course and take up an awkward rolling position broadside on to the long swell. Mr. Fraser, Chief Engineer, climbed wearily up the bridge ladder and tipped his peaked cap to the nape of his neck. He was dressed in blue dungarees, with what had recently been immaculate white shoes. He constantly rolled a piece of greasy cotton waste from palm to palm as he balanced himself to the ship's roll.

"Well?" spat Todd.

"No, no' so well as it might be. The port turbine has stripped a blade, I'm thinking." A short, charred pipe was pushed in Mr. Fraser's mouth.

"You're thinking, Mr. Fraser?" sneered the Captain.

"Ay, just that; until they get the casing clear of the shaft. Of course, it might be two blades gone." The Chief sucked noisily at his pipe while Price fumed with exasperation.

"Sheer incompetence," muttered Todd.

"It seems to me that everybody on this ship is useless!" snarled the other.

"Mr. Price," replied the Chief, "it's no' my place to argue with you, and I'm inclined to agree part of the way with you. Ay!"

"How long?" laconically asked the Captain.

"Mon, ye'll no' have steam on the port engine to-day. Three times have I asked to have that engine down, but I might have saved the ink and paper."

"Mr. Fraser, if owners listened to the bleatings

of chief engineers, they'd be out of business in no time. Why can't I use the starboard engine? Tell me that."

The pipe stem was pushed into the skipper's chest.

"Why? Why? Because ye rang off both. Look at yon telegraph."

All eyes glanced at the instrument and John flushed scarlet. He remembered ringing off when the noise came from below, but now the Captain's eyes were boring into his like gimlets and his forehead went wet with shame. He snatched at the telegraph and rang on the starboard engine. Slowly the steamer's head came round as the screw forced her through the water, and then began the wearying spell of holding her head on a course with the single engine trying to drive her off in a wide circle.

The Chief, having gained a moral victory over the executive branch, began to exploit his position, but a word from the Captain drove him off the bridge.

"If I have to come below to that stinking engine-room I'll——" The threat was left unsaid and the Captain and temporary owner resumed their conversation.

"Todd, this trip is becoming a nightmare!" exclaimed Price. "Everything seems to go wrong and causes further delay."

"I think, sir, you're a trifle nervy. These things are of no consequence, really. I know my Chief

very well and the man takes a delight in making things appear far more serious than they really are. I'll gamble you a box of cheroots that we have steam on that engine before dinner. However, it was a great pity about that telegraph, and he'll be telling that story against me for years."

"Your fault, surely, for leaving a boy in charge."

"Right enough, but he'll not make the same mistake again."

John's ears burned as the words floated out from the chart-house.

"Smoke on the starboard beam, sir," sang out the boy.

"Alter course, Captain, alter course. I don't want shipping to observe our direction." Price spoke hurriedly, almost in a panic, thought John.

Todd picked up the long, high-power telescope and focused it on the distant smoke smudge.

"Hi there, Plumley! Come up on the bridge and take the wheel. Mr. Mayne, hand over and keep me posted on that steamer's movements. Can you use a rangefinder?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right, then. Carry on."

John swung the heavy instrument until he picked up the distant smoke, then jotted down on a piece of paper the reading from the vernier scale.

"Bearing 114° at 7,200 yards, sir."

"H'm!" grunted Todd. "Keep your eyes open."

John and Plumley exchanged a few sentences quietly while the former attended to the distant steamer.

"I don't understand your panic, mister," continued the Captain. "You're not carrying something that can't bear the light of day, are you? Your nerves are all to pieces."

Price shook his head.

"Well, I don't know how long you propose to keep up this secrecy, but it seems daft to me. Every officer knows by now that we are on a bearing for Shark Island."

"Yes, Captain, that is doubtless no longer a secret, although they can't make any use of it; and, therefore, it is most essential that no other ship finds out."

"You can safely leave that to me. Once you decide to put things into my hands you can sit back and relax, but while I remain in the dark I can't give you any protection." Captain Todd spread his hands expressively like a Spaniard.

"Bearing 120° at 6,500 yards, sir."

"By thunder! She's closing with us!" Price sprang up from his chair.

"Keep calm, man, and leave things to me. By her new bearing she will pass miles astern of us. She hasn't altered course at all; the difference in the figures is caused by our movement. Mr. Mayne, alter course two points to starboard."

"Two points starboard, sir."

Price pondered the change of course for a few

moments, then realised that the *Mona* was turning towards rather than away from the stranger. Todd saw his expression and hurriedly explained the position. °

"If, as is unlikely, that steamer has any interest in us, our new course will reveal nothing, and, in addition, to show a desire to run away always gives a bad impression. Leave this to me, sir; I know what I'm doing." Todd walked on to the bridge and examined the steamer through his glasses.

"Bah! She's a Mexican tanker." He grabbed the bridge telephone and glared savagely at the inoffensive instrument.

"Hullo—yes—Captain speaking—I want the Chief. Eh? Oh, it's you, is it? I was just thinking of sending a couple of deck hands below to fix that machinery for you.—What's that? You want another two hours? Rubbish! I said rubbish. Call yourself engineers?—Eh? Mr. Fraser, I'll allow no language like that on my ship—I don't care a— I don't care a cuss how hot it is down there."

John received a broad wink from the Captain as the receiver was replaced.

"Two hours more, Mr. Price. That means about half an hour translated into our language. What's more, that never was a stripped blade or they'd never have repaired it in the time."

"Sit down, Todd," said Price, "and I'll tell you something about this trip. I'm not usually so

secretive, but this particular secret has been worth keeping."

John's ears pricked up, and, whilst not deliberately eavesdropping, he remained within ear-shot of the conversation.

"Shark Island, to use the common or popular name of the place, holds an immense treasure."

Captain Todd showed his disapproval and disbelief by a click of the teeth.

"You're sceptical, skipper? You're thinking of pirates, buccaneers, and Spanish galleons. Yes, of course, but I happen to be a practical business man and I don't reckon to throw away money on wild stunts like that. During the war I was in Japan as a neutral, you understand, and at one period, when things were looking rather grim for them, it was decided to shift a large quantity of gold from Japan to a small state in South America."

"The gold belonged to Japan?"

"No, not quite. It belonged to one of the private banks or merchant houses. Everything was done very secretly and I acted as go-between for the bankers and the steamer. Briefly, the gold was placed aboard and the steamer went ashore on Shark Island as a total loss. She sank in the lagoon."

"But the war has been over some time now? How do you know it's still there? The Japs may have salvaged the cargo?"

"Oh, no, skipper, there was one survivor only,

and quite recently he died also. Yes, very 'unfortunate for him, but, as it happens, he told me the story before he died."

Todd was sufficiently a man of the world not to ask any questions regarding the survivor. It was an instance when tact would accept the story as stated.

"So you're the only person that knows about the gold?"

"Of course. The steamer was bound for America and never reached her destination. From the Japanese point of view, she foundered somewhere in the Pacific. I think you must agree that my information is unique?"

Todd rubbed an enormous hand over his face. "It would seem so, sir, except that you can't be sure that the survivor told nobody else."

"That's most unlikely, but I admit the possibility. It's a business proposition and I want your help."

The Captain considered the matter for a few moments, then strolled to the navigating bridge.

"What's that tanker doing, Mr. Mayne?"

"Passed astern, sir."

"Ah! Wait till she is hull-down, then alter course again."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Captain reseated himself in the chart-house again and picked up the conversation.

"You say you want my help?"

Price nodded. "I can't do the job single-handed, Todd."

"H'm! That, of course, will be an extra charge over and above my wages."

"I might have known that you'd turn grasping!" said the other.

"Oh, no, no. It is purely a matter of business. I have contracted to take you to a certain place for a certain price; anything beyond that must obviously cost more. I fear my conscience won't permit me to say less."

John grinned at the interchange behind him and would have loved dearly to watch the expressions on their faces.

"Don't bother with your conscience, Todd. I'll give you two hundred pounds to salve it."

Again John heard the click of teeth behind him.

"I don't think my conscience could agree to anything less than ten per cent of the salvage, mister."

"You thieving rogue!" Price jumped up and, stood over the Captain in a threatening attitude but the action was pointedly ignored by the victim.

"Sit down and don't be childish!" responded Todd. "I can ask any sum I choose and you can't refuse it. You're completely in my power, and, what's more, you are fortunate in finding a man with such a firm conscience. I wouldn't accept more than ten per cent."

Price was fuming with rage at having fallen into the trap, but he was helpless. His knowledge, once shared, was no longer a secret.

"Remember, Captain, you are under legal contract."

"Oh, I shan't forget that. I shall take you to Shark Island and then land you again somewhere else to cool off. I shall leave you to guess where I should go in the meantime."

"You double-crossing rogue!"

"Come, come. I'm just a business man like yourself. Will you take the ninety per cent and my co-operation, or will you take a return trip to the mainland?"

Price studied his finger-nails and sulkily kept silent.

John had replaced the canvas cover over the range-finder and was standing close to Plumley when the Captain came on to the bridge. Dusk had fallen and the navigation lights were switched on when the telephone rang. Captain Todd replied and a moment later pushed the port engine telegraph to full speed ahead. As the engine worked up to full power the skipper took John by the arm and led him out to the leeward wing of the bridge.

"You heard, young man, what passed in the chart-house?" he asked.

John nodded in the darkness and mumbled assent.

"Yes, I intended that you should. That man, Price, needs watching, and two can watch better than one. I'm taking you into my confidence for several reasons, and the first is that I trust you. Whether you agree with what I said to him does

not matter, but I think I was very reasonable. If you're loyal to me, you'll not regret it. What do you say? Will you join forces with me?"

Their hands met in the dark and John's was almost crushed.

CHAPTER III

THE DIVING PROBLEM

AT slow speed the *Mona* crept forward towards the opening in the lagoon. They had arrived off the island the previous evening, but nothing would persuade the Captain to approach nearer than two miles. The Admiralty charts showed no reefs or shoals outside the lagoon, but the sparseness of marked soundings told the experienced mariner that danger could exist. Price was impatient, but the Captain had the last word.

With morning, one of the ship's boats was lowered and sent ahead, a look-out was posted in the bows, another in the crosstrees of the mast, and a knot of men clustered on the bridge. Anson operated the patent echo-sounding apparatus, Plumley had charge of the wheel, and John stood with his hand on the engine telegraph. Captain Todd was on the bridge with his eyes everywhere at once. Slowly and carefully she crept forward, following the wake of the boat. The echo-sounder gave readings of ample water below the keel and the headlands of the lagoon slipped past.

The lagoon was four hundred yards wide and nearly a mile long, and the water constantly deepened as they entered.

"Stop sounding, Mr. Anson. There will be no shallows inside. Stop engines. Hard a' starboard. Half-astern, starboard engine."

The orders caused the steamer to swing round so that her bows faced the lagoon opening.

"Half-ahead, port engine." The swing increased and the mirror surface of the lagoon became churned with creamy foam from the screws.

"That will do. Stop both. Let go stern anchor." As the chain roared out through the hawse-pipe the bow gently swung until the bow anchor dropped and held the steamer fore and aft.

Ringin' off his engines, John turned his eyes to the shore, which consisted of a sandy, shelving beach with a belt of tropical timber behind. The vivid green of the vegetation sparkled in the morning sun. His attention was then called by a hail from the Captain, who stood with Price on the main deck. Dashing down from the bridge, he joined them by the rope-ladder hanging overboard. The crew of the boat were ordered aboard the *Mona*, and their places were taken by the Captain, Price and John.

"Start the motor, young man," said Todd, taking his seat by the helm. "And now, Mr. Price, where does your wreck lie?"

"My information places her at the easterly end of the lagoon."

The motor-boat sped across a quarter mile of water and then stopped.

"Keep still, both of you," ordered Todd. "When

the water settles we should see something around here."

The ripples and foam gradually dispersed, and then John saw what appeared to be the rusty plates of a steamer.

"That's her, Mr. Price, and at a guess I should say she lies in less than eight fathoms. Take the oars, John, and put us ahead very gently. Don't disturb the water more than you need."

Another half an hour was spent over the wreck, and the results proved that the steamer lay with her bow to the east and the mouth of her funnel to the northern bank of the lagoon.

"All we need now is diving gear," said Todd.

"That is provided, skipper. I'm not such a fool as to come all this way without thinking of that. If you will open up the hold you will find some cases marked with a blue circle. They contain the compressor pump and the diving suit. Get them up before lunch and I'll go down this afternoon."

"You realise, of course, that there can be no further secrecy? Once we start diving operations, there's only one idea in the men's minds."

"Well, what of it?" asked Price aggressively.

"Nothing in particular, except that men, being human, will expect something of a picking."

"Then, they can expect, or you can part up with some of the share which you illegally extorted!" snarled Price in a venomous tone.

"Oh, come now; you offered me ten per cent. Nothing illegal there, sir. However, have it as you

like, but I still think you could afford to pay them a few pounds. There's nothing like a bit of co-operation."

"To hell with co-operation! They take no special risks. Let the dogs keep their places!"

"Ah, well, start the motor, John. I can't do more than offer a little advice." Todd mumbled to himself as the boat headed back to the ship. King, the mulatto boatswain, met him as the Captain clambered aboard.

"The starboard watch have gone ashore, sir."

Todd scratched his head and stared at his bo'sun.

"You mean, you've let 'em go without permission?" John heard the warning, metallic ring in the Captain's voice.

"There was nothing for 'em to do so I let 'em go."

"You know my standing orders—no man is allowed ashore without permission. You're disgraced to able seaman. Get for'ard and move yourself."

All might have gone well, except that the mulatto made the fatal mistake of grinning at his Captain. John knew that the Skipper could use his tongue, but he had never seen him in action. The arm came back, then shot forward like the stroke of a piston—the bo'sun crashed his head against an iron stanchion as he fell pole-axed, but for all the notice the Captain took the man might have been dead.

"Plumley!" The ex-petty officer ran forward

and stood at attention. "You are promoted to bo'sun. Keep this scum in order, and if you have any bother just mention my name."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Your first job, Plumley, is to bring the star-board watch back. I don't mind them being ashore, but I'll have my orders obeyed. I'm going to dinner now and you can report progress later. Don't tell me what methods you use—I'm a man of peace myself—but make your authority felt."

The mighty shoulders of the Captain and Plumley were much of a size, and John wondered how they would fare in a set-to.

Mr. Anson and the Chief Engineer were present at lunch and John enquired how the First Mate was progressing. He had been ordered to bed on the previous day and nobody knew the cause of the trouble.

"I have in mind, sir, stripping down the port engine if time permits."

Captain Todd paused with a piece of meat on his fork.

"You'll strip nothing, Mr. Fraser, without my orders."

"I was asking for permission, sir."

"And permission is not granted. We are engaged in a little salvage matter, and I may require steam at short notice. This island belongs to San Salvador and it's just possible that they may object to our presence. A nod is as good as a wink to most men, even Scots."

"If you are suggesting——" fired up the Chief.

"I'm suggesting you leave the port engine alone and have main steam ready at short notice."

"I'm thinking there may be trouble."

"There'll be plenty if there's no steam."

John was scarcely able to chew with amusement at the two old friends pretending to squabble. A stranger would have prophesied bloodshed at any moment.

"For Pete's sake, let's get on deck and check the diving gear," grumbled Price, who had finished his meal. Leaving Anson and Fraser to a game of draughts, the others went up the companion and inspected the boxes which had been brought up from the hold.

"What do you call this?" asked Todd, holding up a rubber diving suit by the shoulders. Price glared at him, then suddenly stared at the diminutive suit.

"Good heavens! I've been swindled!" he cried.

"Ah, you've been done, all right. Possibly you were a trifle unco-operative with the agent who sold you the stuff?" The Captain winked at John, then wrinkled his face.

"Do you think it might stretch, Mr. Price?"

The suit was only a shade over five feet from deck to helmet and quite impossible for a man of Price's size.

"This, sir, is a Japanese outfit," said the Captain, examining some markings on the rubber.

Price turned to John with a sullen look and bit his lips.

"It looks, to me, Mayne, that you will need to be our diver," he said. Captain Todd said nothing.

"Well, sir, I've never been down, but I don't mind trying. It's not very deep, is it?"

"Hurry up, then! Slip off your clothes and try on the suit."

"Just a moment, Mr. Price," put in the Captain. "My conscience is rather troubling me. I doubt whether I can allow the laddie to take such a risk without adequate compensation."

Price's expression was that of a fiend.

"More blackmail, eh?"

"Come, John, we'll move away and watch him do his own diving." The skipper ostentatiously took the boy's arm.

"Wait, you old curmudgeon! How much more do you want?" Price was cornered and knew he had no option but to agree.

"Well, since you make an open offer like that, I'll be reasonable—as reasonable as any man could be. Let me see. Shall we say fifteen per cent for my services, and one per cent for the crew? That leaves you eighty-four per cent, and I don't think anybody could call that unreasonable."

"You unprincipled blackguard! That gives you fifty thousand. It's scandalous!"

"The trouble is my conscience. If I work contrary to that, I find I can't sleep."

Without the hope of an alternative, Price had no option but to accept the terms.

"All right, and that's the last farthing I'll pay!" he grumbled. "Get into that suit, Mayne!"

"Not so fast, mister. I'm the only man around here that gives orders. Everybody else takes 'em—everybody."

Price took a pace back as the words spat across the deck. His hand slid round to his hip pocket and Todd waited.

"I take so little notice of that gun that I'm not even bothering to take it from you. Chew it over in your cabin."

The afternoon was devoted to practice dives. The gear had been taken close to the shore in boats and John made a series of descents commencing at six feet and gradually working up to twelve. Captain Todd had explained the idea of the outfit, and he wished John to have complete confidence before going down to any depth. The boy had been inclined to panic at the first attempt, although he knew that his helmet was only a few inches below the surface of the water.

The feeling of being enclosed and the difficulty of moving was strange. There were so many things to remember, so many instructions which Captain Todd had driven home, that he was sure that something must go wrong. The second attempt was a little better and by tea-time he had overcome his first horror of the business.

Dinner that evening was an unpleasant affair,

with Price belittling all the precautions which the Captain saw fit to take.

"Ay, mon, you're lucky to find a laddie that will dive. I'm thinking that, when he's finished with your job, he might take a look at my screws," said Fraser.

"You're thinking?" Todd scowled.

"Every hour we waste is precious. The boy must go down immediately after dawn." Price was insistent.

"We'll have it done my way, sir. The boy will dive when I give the word."

"To-day was perfect, and who knows what weather we shall have to-morrow?" grumbled Price.

"Mr. Anson, you'll take charge of the ship to-morrow. I shall be away with two boats after breakfast, so keep a good look-out. Mr. Fraser, would you like to watch the diving?"

"I'd like it fine, but I have not the time. I'm checking some of the wiring to-morrow. Some people have to work."

"That proves that your department is not run properly. Now, if I had charge of the engines——"

"Mon, there's not a captain at sea that doesn't think the same. The only people that take a mate's ticket are those with insufficient brains to become an engineer."

Price left the table in disgust, while Anson grinned at John.

"Not at all, Mr. Fraser. The reason why Scots

are so addicted to engine-rooms is their natural liking for dark, smelly places."

The argument came to its usual end with the cribbage board, and whilst John and Anson played draughts their elders cheated each other at the opposite end of the table.

The two boats lay on the shore side of the wreck, Price and two seamen in one, and the Captain, John, and two men in the other. The young diver sat ready dressed in the stern seat with his helmet in his hands.

"Now, remember your orders," said Todd. "This is just a preliminary survey to see how she lies. Take your time and signal as soon as you feel uncomfortable. Are you ready?"

John lifted the heavy brass helmet which the Captain put in position and screwed home. The joint was made with interrupted threads so that a half-turn securely locked it. The various lines were laid carefully and neatly in the boat and the air pump was already tested. Todd fixed the rubber air line from the helmet to the outlet of the air pump and then screwed up John's thick facepiece. The boy was now cut off from the world in his rubber suit and could hear nothing but the surge of compressed air as it entered through the inlet valve. It was hot and uncomfortable as he laboriously lifted his heavily weighted feet over the stern.

A few steps down brought the water level with

his facepiece, and then came that nasty moment when he knew that he was completely submerged. Free from the ladder, he sank towards the bottom. Keeping his mind to the job in hand and away from the fifty feet of water above him, he steadied himself on his legs and switched on the special underwater electric torch.

The light was dim, but sufficient to show up objects within a few feet. Walking slowly and awkwardly towards the wreck, he noticed that the sea bed was remarkably level and smooth. He tried to work out which way the ship was lying, but, with a total lack of landmarks to guide him, it was impossible to tell one point of the compass from another. He turned left and plodded along the side of the vessel, whence a few yards brought him to the bulk of the funnel lying at right angles to his direction, and there he paused and took his bearings. He shone his torch upwards and noticed an open hatch some six feet above his head. Presumably it would give him access to the interior of the ship, but it was beyond his reach without a ladder.

He was beginning to feel annoyed and depressed with his task when suddenly his signal line jerked. Captain Todd was evidently anxious for some sign from his diver. John gave the line a tug in reply and then walked forward to give himself a clearance before surfacing. The hatch he had found was sufficient for a first dive, and he might as well report progress. A second signal to the boat was

answered by his feet leaving the bed. He slowly rose to the surface, and as his head broke water he grabbed at the ladder and stared into the Captain's anxious face. He experienced a tremendous relief as the face piece was unscrewed, then the singing and hissing ceased, and he drew in a great gulp of cool, fresh air. As he lay against a thwart, his helmet was removed and he gave a report of his discovery.

"I'll take a boat back to the ship for a ladder put in Price quickly as he heard of the hatch. Tom nodded at the words.

"There's something about that man," he went on as Price was being pulled across to the *Mona*, "that makes me want to—however——" He broke off as though remembering that criticism was not his duty. John took a long drink from a water jug and gazed round the lagoon.

"Remember, laddie, not to be stampeded by Price. He is my employer, but I am the captain—you understand my meaning?"

John grinned as he nodded his head.

"What do you think I shall find through the hatch?" the boy asked.

"Who knows? This is the devil of a job and may take weeks. We should have brought three sets of diving gear and some professional divers."

John looked downcast at the words.

"Oh, I'm not belittling your efforts—don't think that, but here is a shipload of humans idling their time away while one boy does all the work."

"I don't mind the work, sir. When I've been down for another trip I shall get along much faster."

"Hm! You can't hurry diving. I've done some myself and I know. Did you see any fish below? Anything sizeable?"

"No. I was too busy with the job."

"Next time, keep a lookout. If you see anything big, just give your signal line a pull. I have known cases of divers being attacked."

Price's return with an iron ladder was followed by a second descent. John soon found his position by the funnel and manœuvred his ladder into place. Clambering up with some difficulty, he secured the ladder to a deck fitment and peered into the darkness of the hold. The deck of the ship was at right angles to the sea bed, which meant that the ladder fixed from the hatch to the bottom of the hold was parallel. Outside the ship the light was dim, but looking into the interior was black as night.

For a long time he stood at the mouth of the hatch and wondered whether he would ever raise the courage to make an entry. It would be necessary to crawl forward along the rungs of the parallel ladder like a cat, and one slip would decant him into the depths of the hold. John was unable to tell whether he felt hot or cold, but his mouth was dry as he carefully drew himself forward into the bowels of the ship. His greatest fear was for the safety of his lines; it needed only one kink to cut off his air supply and the first warning would be a

sense of gasping. Instinctively he stopped and adjusted the valves on his headpiece. Another few steps and he saw by the beam from his torch that the hold, or storeroom, contained boxes.

Resting on his catwalk for a while, he tried to imagine his actions if he were not hampered by the diving suit. To reach any of the boxes would necessitate dropping to the floor, which in turn would need another ladder from his position on the catwalk. There was nothing further he could accomplish in his present state, so he slowly backed towards the hatchway. It was awkward in the cumbersome suit complicated by the trailing lines which he had to keep clear. And then, while he was almost within grasping distance of the hatch combing, the disaster occurred. His foot slipped from the ladder and he toppled sideways to the hull resting on the sand. For a few moments he panicked; then, pulling himself together, he lay panting as though knocked out.

Struggling awkwardly to his feet, John reached up towards the opening and judged he was about four feet short. He tested his lines and assured himself that they were free. The knowledge soothed him somewhat and he looked round with the aid of the torch to see what he might use to reach the hatch. As he looked down he smiled at his fears with the realisation that he was standing on a set of ready-made steps. The boxes simply needed piling on top of each other in pyramid form. It was not quite as simple as he had expected, but

gradually the stairs were built, then with a wave of relief he grasped the iron of the rigid ladder. Securely perched, once more on his catwalk, he rested before making his exit through the hatch. His earlier fears of being under water had gone and he felt quite at home in the unnatural element except for the difficulty of moving around in his cumbersome suit.

John grinned to himself at the idea of having used the boxes of gold to construct a ladder, and wondered how Price would receive the news. Suddenly a dark flash swam through his arc of light, larger than any normal fish, and for a moment he imagined it to be a shark. He paused and drew his long knife from his belt. The shape had gone, and although he waited for some time beside the rusty hull there was nothing to be seen. With hands quivering, he felt a tug on his line, answered, then walked clear of the wreck and began to surface.

His feet had scarcely left bottom, however, when again the forbidding shape swam into vision. It was a shark, and its size was appalling. The tail flashed before him and in a second he was staring into the monster's face, if such it might be called, a face with slightly open mouth. Both rows of teeth were visible, white and sharp. He flashed his knife up at the under part of the body and felt resistance, then knew he had entered the flesh. Flailing and threshing, the brute came forward and passed within inches of his facepiece.

John was terrified that the struggles of the great

fish would damage his airline, but he had overlooked the fact that he was rapidly surfacing.

As his head broke water and he bobbed towards the boat ladder, he could see consternation on the Captain's face. Tumbled aboard, he had his helmet removed, but could hear nothing for a while until the singing in his ears subsided.

"Was it a shark?" asked Todd.

"What?" countered John.

"What's the reason for the blood in the water?" went on Todd.

"Oh, some fish went for me—at least, I don't know whether it was dangerous or not."

"Never mind about fishes," put in Price. "What did you find below?"

Todd glared and proceeded to extract John from his suit while the boats were heading back to the *Mona*.

"I found the gold!"

Price's eyes sparkled at the words and even the Captain stopped work for a moment.

"You found it?" asked Price in a rushed, solemn voice. Both men listened carefully while the story was told.

"You say the hatch was open?" Todd looked puzzled.

"Yes, sir, and the gold was packed in boxes. I'm sure of that, unless they contained lead."

Price was looking dubiously at the skipper. "What's biting you, Todd?"

"Doesn't it strike you, mister, that there's some-

thing almost uncanny in finding an open hatch with the gold lying conveniently around?"

"Why boggle at a stroke of luck?" asked Price.

Todd looked at John. "Tell me more about those boxes. How many were there? How large was the hold?"

"It wasn't an ordinary cargo hold. I should say it was roughly the size of our saloon, sir, and the boxes were rather like cigar boxes neatly tied round with thin copper or brass."

The Captain pondered the information until Price broke in: "It's simple enough, surely? Granted that the kid had a stroke of luck in dropping in the place he did, all we need explain is the open hatch."

"Yes, that's all; but it's a tidy point before lunch."

Price scarcely touched his food, but the other two made a good meal. Feeling replete after his heavy repast, John had some difficulty in keeping his eyes open, but Price was obviously anxious to return to the wreck as soon as possible.

"Hurry up, Skipper. Let's get moving," he urged.

"Not so fast," answered Todd, cutting a wedge of cheese. "Suppose you explain the open hatch?"

"That's simple enough. The ship was in danger of foundering, shall we say?" Todd nodded at the suggestion and Price went on: "What's more likely than that they opened up the hatch with a view to getting the gold into the boats? They had left

matters too late and she went down with all hands."

"Yes," agreed Todd. "It's a possible story, but it leaves a lot of things unexplained. It seems a startling coincidence to me for a diver to practically drop on the gold in the first dive."

"Does it matter? Here, wake the kid up and let's get going." John's head had fallen to the table and sleep had him well enveloped.

"No, there will be no more diving to-day. The boy is tired out, and we'll let him sleep it off."

"Rubbish!" burst out Price. "Waste the whole afternoon? Why, curse it, he's hardly done an hour's work!"

There was no reply to the outburst and Price recognised the obstinate look he had previously battled against.

CHAPTER IV

A NIGHT ATTACK

THE afternoon was not wasted from the Captain's point of view. Half the crew were sent ashore to collect fresh fruit and stretch their legs, whilst the remainder were kept busy aboard. After waking from his sleep, John had gone on deck and was chatting to Plumley. The bo'sun was supervising the rigging of sun-awnings and had fallen naturally into his new position.

"A smarter ship than the *Connemara*, eh?" the boy remarked.

"She's more looks to her, I agree, but I wouldn't say she was all that much smarter." Plumley gazed seawards through the lagoon entrance.

"What do you make of that sky, Master John?"

They stared at the brilliant, almost crude, colouring of the sunset. The yellows and reds were overlaid in parts with black cloud.

"I don't like it."

"No, it's an ugly sky. There's wind there."

John looked at the awnings and then back at the western sky. Both were thinking much the same thing when the Captain's voice saved them from making a decision.

"Mr. Mayne, get those awnings stowed away.

Bo'sun, take a second anchor away from the stern."

Plumley muttered something under his breath about wasting two hours' work, while John sang out his fresh orders.

The wind had risen by supper-time and even in the shelter of the lagoon the *Mona* was lying tight to her anchors. Price was glum and had little to say, and John suspected that he was well out of favour. Mr. Richards, the First Mate, had made his first appearance at the meal and John was shocked at his drawn and haggard look.

The door of the saloon opened and a seaman in singlet and trousers sang out: "Two-masted schooner making up for the lagoon entrance, sir."

The colour in Price's face faded, but the Captain only groped in his pocket for a pipe. A tenseness became apparent in the brightly-lit saloon.

"Mr. Anson, take a glass on deck and give me a report."

"This is an infernal nuisance! This place is not on the steamer routes," grumbled Price.

"No, but she's not a steamer. She may be making for shelter—there's no knowing with sail. If this vessel is on a normal voyage, she'll be away by morning or as soon after as the wind permits. There is nothing unusual or suspicious in us being here, so we'll just take it easy until she leaves."

"Agreed, skipper, but suppose——?"

"In that case, Mr. Price, we shall have to do some quick thinking. If your story of the wreck is

true, why or how should somebody call on the same errand as us?"

Price blinked at the question. "Let's hope there's nothing to worry about." He tried to assume an easy expression, but John could see the tenseness of his mouth.

Anson came down the companion, binoculars under his arm.

"She's heading straight for the opening, sir. They must have been here before, or else they're taking an awful big chance in the failing light."

The Captain picked up his cap and went on deck, followed by John and Price. It was a strange sight from the yacht's bridge. The schooner was painted black, so that in the semi-darkness the hull was almost invisible below the white sails. She came flying along through the opening in a shower of spray, turned sharply to port away from the *Mona*, and came up into the wind. They heard the rattle of an anchor chain and could just make out the canvas being dropped.

"John, drop into the launch and warm the motor. We'll pay them a visit."

"You're not going aboard?" protested Price.

"Why ever not? Great Jupiter! You give me a pain. What is more natural than a courtesy visit? For all we know, they may need some assistance."

"I'll come with you," said Price.

"Oh, no. The captain of a ship pays a call by himself. I'll tell you all about it when I return."

"I'd prefer to come."

"I'm not interested in that. Shove off, John."

The launch moved off into the night with the Captain at the tiller.

"You'll come aboard with me," Todd said quietly, "and don't talk. Leave that to me and don't be surprised at anything I say."

The launch ran under the ship's counter and came up on the starboard side.

"Ahoy, schooner! Captain Todd of the *Mona*!"

"Take hold of the rope, Cap'n. I'm dropping a ladder over for you."

The voice from the schooner's deck sounded very nasal

John followed his master up the rope-ladder and then down into the cabin. The bearded man of the nasal voice explained their presence to the man sitting at the table, then left them.

"I'm glad to meet you, Captain Todd. This is——?"

"He is my acting Third. Mayne is the name."

The stranger was dressed in shore-going clothes and gave no impression of being a seaman. His voice was soft and pleasant, but his smile was fugitive.

"My name is Smith," he returned. Even John doubted the truth of that statement.

"Nice schooner, Captain Smith."

"Yes, but not Captain, please. That is not my—er—profession. It's nice of you to call. Were you needing anything?" The question was put in an

easy, pleasant manner, but somewhere underneath lay an air of aggression.

“No, thank you. I was wondering the same thing. I fancied perhaps you had run for shelter?”

“Shelter? Oh, no. I often call here. I like the solitude and quiet, and it's nice to get away from people. When will you be leaving, Captain?”

John had some difficulty in keeping a smile from his face. Smith was evidently well able to conduct a dialogue without giving away any information.

“My owner is of similar opinion regarding solitude. In fact, he chartered my vessel for that very purpose. Still, Mr. Smith, I should say this lagoon is large enough to contain the two ships without falling over each other?”

Smith shook his head. “It seems you have decided to stay.”

Todd realised that the other had gathered the impression that there was a good reason for them both to stay.

“The matter is really one for my owner, Mr. Smith. It makes no difference to me whether I'm here or elsewhere.”

Smith rattled his fingers on the table-top and John noticed their whiteness.

“I'll make it worth your while to leave me the solitude of the island,” he said curtly.

A normal chartered captain with no interest either way might have been expected to show some sort of agreement, which placed Todd in a difficulty.

"I'm an obstinate sort of cuss, Mr. Smith."

"You decline the offer? Very well, maybe I should have shown my hand earlier. I have a right here, Captain, and you have none."

"Really? In an open anchorage?"

"I have leased this island for a period and that, I fancy, gives me rights."

"But what harm are we doing—lying in the lagoon?"

"I didn't pay good money to share this place with others. I paid for my whim and I intend to enjoy the island alone."

Todd glanced at John as though seeking inspiration. The interview had gone entirely wrong from his point of view.

"If I may put in a word, sir," said John, "perhaps Mr. Smith would let you see his lease of the island so that our owner might be satisfied?"

"Yes, that's so. May I see the document?"

The other spread his hands expressively.

"I'm sorry, but it's with my lawyers, but you may take my word."

"Of course, quite so; but, surely, a document of that nature must be with you? It has no value back on the mainland. One doesn't take out a gun licence and go shooting without it."

Smith looked blankly indifferent at John's words, but Todd saw that the man was bluffing.

"I should advise you, Todd, to clear out in the morning. Don't look for trouble."

"I never do, but, strangely enough, it always seems to come my way."

Smith opened the table drawer and placed an automatic pistol in front of himself.

"I've never bothered about such things as gun licences," he observed.

"Pretty little thing, mister, but not much range," said Todd. "I prefer a rifle for any sort of distance." His head jerked roughly in the direction of the *Mona*. Smith put the pistol away and laughed.

"Ah, well, we shall see in the morning, unless you have picked up your mudhooks by then."

Back in the boat, John sat next to Todd as they made for the *Mona's* riding lights.

"Theatrical sort of cove. I'm glad you tripped him up over that lease business."

"I fancied he was bluffing from the first, sir."

"Well, there's trouble ahead, right enough."

Todd stamped below to the saloon and summoned all his officers.

"Now, gentlemen, in a very few words the position is war between us and the schooner. They want to run us out and I'm not going. Just what will happen I'm not sure, but I'm opening up the magazine to-night."

Eyes opened wide as the gravity of the situation became apparent. Price was excited and obviously wished to talk but the Captain held the floor.

"The first thing is to prepare against any attack and then see how they propose handling the posi-

tion. From now on, the officers and Plumley will take two-hour watches and the anchor watch will be doubled. Don't be afraid to use the searchlight if you see or hear anything unusual, and call me at once.—Any questions?"

"Is the watch to be armed, sir?" asked Anson.

"Yes, a rifle for each man, and fully loaded. Here's the keys and now get busy."

Richards and Anson left the saloon to open the magazine and issue the weapons, while the Chief Engineer, who had listened quietly, removed his pipe from his mouth.

"It's not usual to arm the engine-room staff, sir."

"I'm aware of that, Mr. Fraser, and you don't advise it?"

"Frankly, I don't. It's your business, not mine, but niggers and dagoes don't mix well with rifles."

The Skipper nodded as the Chief left the room, and turned to Price. John was sitting quietly in a corner and proposed waiting until he received any orders. Price helped himself to a drink and spoke quietly, as though unsure of himself.

"Why give them the initiative? If we dropped down alongside we could probably board them. They've no right here, Todd."

"Life's cheap around these parts, but if any shooting takes place, I aim to be the right side of the law. If I'm attacked, I'm at liberty to defend myself. Follow?"

"Bah! What is the law in a place like this?

What does it matter who fires first? Witnesses can always be bribed."

"Maybe, Price, but a man in the witness box always manages better with the truth. Anyway, that's how it's going to be done. You can trust me not to be run off this island, but I'm not starting the match with an act of piracy."

"Piracy?" sneered Price in an undertone.

"If one ship makes an unlawful attack on another, what else is it? In law, mister, the reason for the quarrel don't matter."

"I thought you were made of better metal than that, but apparently your reputation is mostly bubble."

"I've been called most things in my time, but I'm not aiming to have pirate added, so good night."

Price had sufficient sense to leave the matter and walked from the saloon without replying.

"Excuse me putting the same point, sir, but there was something sensible about his suggestion." John put the question very diffidently.

"Of course, young man, and I can see it as well as you, but can't you perceive the difficulty? If we agree that I can't start the shooting, what else can I do? We are both engaged in an illegal business and neither can invoke the law, such as it is."

"I understand, but it's a pity."

The grizzled face looked across at the perplexed youngster.

"Get to your bunk, John; don't undress and don't worry."

The crack of a rifle, followed by another and then an irregular burst of fire, brought John from his bunk with a rush. Pushing his feet into a pair of slippers, he grabbed his revolver and dashed for the companion. The night was dark, but the orange spurts and crackles came from the bows. He crouched, preparatory to rushing forward, when he heard the sound of clinking metal the other side of the bulwarks by his side. A grapnel flung aboard just missed hitting him, and, still crouching, he moved to the bulwarks and peered over.

Crack—crack—crack! He fired three shots into the shapes in the boat below, then dodged his head under cover. A piercing scream came from somebody in the boat and then followed a rapid ping of bullets against the steel hull. Still under cover, he pushed his arm over the side and let fly another burst.

Somebody was running aft from the bows, and as he felt in his pockets for a fresh clip of ammunition he shouted to the man to keep clear of the side. It was a deckhand, an Irishman, and he crouched beside John. From below them came the sound of argument and cursing as if the attackers were of two minds.

"Ready now, when I say the word!"

Two heads rose together and John's revolver again spat into the darkness, accompanied by the man's repeater. Crouching down again, the next sounds he heard were from a greater distance, so without hesitation the boy peered over the bul-

works and saw that the boat had pulled away. They had cut loose the grapnel and sheered off.

The firing from the bows had also died away and a moment later the brilliant beam of the *Mona's* searchlight played across the lagoon. The two boats could be seen rowing towards the schooner. As the beam turned inboard and swept along the main deck, John turned his eyes away from the dazzling light.

"Aft there, are you all right?"

John waved back to the bridge in reply to Todd's hail and grinned at the seaman by his side.

Up in the chart-house, John watched the Captain return from his tour of inspection. His face was grave as he sat in a chair and looked at the company. John and Price stood by the door and Fraser balanced a two-inch spanner in his hands, sitting on a chart table.

"I think we may say that round one is ours."

"Ay, Captain Todd, if you can couple murder with a game?"

The skipper snorted then looked at the long, heavy spanner.

"I suppose that lump of metal is not murderous?"

"It is entirely a weapon of defence, sir."

"Just as you say, Mr. Fraser. I'll not argue the point with you. Richards is dead; shot through the head, and one man has a throwing-knife through his shoulder. Other than that, I think we have only a few scratches."

"Ay, I knew well there'd be murder."

"Oh, shut up croaking! It's us or them," snarled Price.

"I reckon that we accounted for four of them in the bows. What was your bag, John?"

"I pumped nine shots into a boatload, I've no idea of the result."

"Ah!" said the Captain. "Then, I fancy we can call it a safe half-dozen."

"Good enough to teach them a lesson," said Price.

"Well, I propose to enter this business in the ship's log. That puts me where I want to be. In defending this ship I lost an officer—you all understand? All right. Now I propose to deal with Smith."

The attack had taken place an hour before dawn, so nobody returned to sleep. With daylight the ship was washed down and glasses were anxiously turned on the schooner. She had shifted position during the night and now lay at the far end of the lagoon. After breakfast John was sent for by the Captain, and, arriving, found Anson already in conversation. Todd sat forward and explained the position.

"I want to start diving again as soon as I can, but at the same time I must make sure that the schooner is not up to any tricks. For some reason she has moved away as far as possible, and I want some information as to what's cooking. My idea is to land you two on the beach and get you to circle

behind the shelter of the trees until you come up level with her. Find a likely looking tree, shin up and take a good look."

Right, sir. Come on, Mayne."

"Wait a moment. In case they have a glass trained this way take a couple of men with you and a water cask. Your trip to the beach will then look less suspicious. I shall expect you back not later than eight bells, which allows you nearly three hours."

The two vessels lay about a thousand yards apart, but the traverse which the officers had to make was much longer, as they had to walk round the arc of a chord. The undergrowth was denser than they had expected and twice they had difficulty in crossing marshy streams. John felt his clothes sticking and could see that Anson was smothered with black flies and midges. The accursed insects swarmed in thousands and brushing them off made no difference.

"Careful here, Mayne. I figure we're about level with the schooner."

• John glanced round and noticed a lofty tree with a convenient low arm. Swarming up the trunk, he grabbed a horizontal limb and searched seawards.

"Just about right. I can see her sticks from here."

Another five minutes brought them to the verge of the brush and they stepped carefully, keeping cover between them and the ship. The schooner lay some fifty yards from the beach, anchored bows

on to them. Without glasses they could pick out the crew working on deck. A knot of men were occupied right forward in the eye of the bows and John focused his glasses. A strange object, obviously heavy and cumbersome, was being man-handled into position, but he could connect it with nothing nautical that he could remember. He called Anson's attention and the mate swung his binoculars.

"For Pete's sake! It's a machine-gun!"

John put up his glasses again and, having been given the clue, saw that Anson was correct. He had never seen a machine-gun before, but there was no doubt in his mind. He tried to recall what he had read about such weapons, but it was no help to the depression which he now experienced. The stupid idea persisted for a while that Smith was taking an unfair advantage, then he grinned to himself as he realised that this was not a picnic.

"How is this going to affect us, Mr. Anson?" he asked.

"Can't say." The mate scratched his head in perplexity. •

"What would the range be?"

"Don't know. I can't tell what type the gun is, but I think we've found out enough for the Old Man to worry about."

John would have liked to stay, but Anson was the senior, so they turned inland for the return trip.

The Captain received the news on the bridge,

and seemed surprised at first then relieved at finding the reason for the evasive tactics of the schooner. "a

"There was no sign of a landing party?"

"No, sir. Just the usual activities apart from the machine-gun. Looks pretty serious, eh?"

"Hm, a machine-gun is very dependent on its operator. If they've got a first-class gunner it can cause us quite a headache, but I've found a number of people who have overlooked that point."

"What would you do in their position, sir?"

"That's a leading question. Slip below, John, and ask the Chief to come up."

Mr. Fraser was standing on a grating in the engine-room, supervising the application of a coat of whitewash. The steam pipes had already been coated and gleamed with cleanliness. All the brass work had been polished and the place looked fit for an exhibition. John delivered his message and hurried on deck.

The conference was about to commence when Plumley knocked and entered.

"Excuse me, sir, I thought you should know that King is missing. All hands are at dinner and I've never known him late for a meal."

"Desertion to the enemy, eh? Well, good riddance! His kidney is better out of the way."

Plumley touched his cap and withdrew.

"Don't bother about King. He knows nothing which is of any interest to Smith. Now, regarding the schooner, I think an old-fashioned attack by

boarding is our best bet. It may sound stupid at first thought, but if you think for a moment you'll see the point. We must take command of her, and the only means is to lay alongside. They have already tried with boats and if we adopted the same tactics we should be repulsed."

"Yes," agreed Anson, "we haven't sufficient manpower or boats to make that form of attack."

John's eyes glittered with excitement. "You mean to lay alongside with grapnels and rush her?"

"No, not quite so Nelsonian as that, and we haven't any cutlasses, young man. This bridge and chart-house are armour-plated and there are loopholes fitted; that is a legacy from the war. My idea is to drop down the lagoon to close range and drive everybody off her decks with rifle-fire from the bridge. She's flush-decked except for a wooden wheel-house remember. I can then send my boarders away and place a guard over the hatches."

Todd stared from face to face in turn. John was rather staggered at the forthright daring and Anson moistened his lips.

"Well, Mr. Fraser?"

"Well, Cap'n Todd? You haven't asked me here to listen to that. In any case, you wouldn't bother if I said the plan was crack-brained."

"No, of course not. I asked you here to explain about steam."

"Steam?" The Chief puffed an imaginary cigar.

"Steam, Mr. Fraser, will take the place of cutlasses. You will lead a high-pressure hose to the

bridge and as soon as I throw the grapnels that hose will stop any idea of repelling boarders."

"Ay, I knew it would be something murderous!"

"There's no need for anybody to get hurt if they keep below," went on Todd; "but I have seen high-pressure steam do some terrible damage. Can you fix that?"

"Oh, ay, I can fix it, but I'll have no hand in such a murderous business."

"You won't need any hands. All you have to do is to turn on the tap, or whatever you call the darned thing, when I give the word. Does that salve your conscience?"

"Ay, it's no business of mine what you do with the steam."

"Good! Then, get your gear rigged this afternoon and be ready to move at dawn."

The Chief left the chart-house, muttering to himself. Todd turned to the other two.

"Don't worry about that old curmudgeon. If he gets loose with one of his spanners I should be sorry to be his opponent."

The arrangements for the attack in the morning did not take long, and midway through the afternoon Anson suggested to John that they stretch their legs ashore. Landing from the boat, they struck inland with the idea of crossing the stream. After passing through the thick belt of undergrowth they came to a more open stretch with grass growing between the trees. The drawback to walking

inland was the lack of breeze and the heat. The air was hot and they both felt sticky when they arrived at a large pool.

"What about a fresh-water bath?" said the Mate.

"Good enough," replied John, sitting down to unlace his shoes.

They splashed around in the warm water for some time and then John, feeling lazy, walked across to a patch of long, rank grass with the idea of rolling in it to dry himself. Stretched out on his side, he was covered with the long growth. He yawned and felt too lazy to get up and dress, when a sound kept him rigid.

Three bodies wriggled past him not six feet from where he lay. He lifted his head an inch and saw Anson with his back towards him, sunning himself at the edge of the pool. The men from the schooner were all clutching pistols and, for all he knew, there might be others lying in wait. In desperate indecision he lay watching, while they drew nearer to the unsuspecting Anson. If he called out or showed himself they would both be taken, and yet to lie doggo was denying Anson the ghost of a chance. The choice was taken from him as the men arrived within pistol-shot of the pool. They rose and spread out.

"Get those clothes on, pronto!" Anson gave one start of surprise, flashed a look round for his late companion, and grabbed his trousers.

"Get moving, and don't waste time!" They had

closed round him while John still lay with one hand clutching his clothes.

They finally disappeared in single file, with Anson securely roped to the arm of one of them. John waited for a few more minutes, then hurriedly dressed. His first thought was to follow them, but he quickly realised its futility and ran for the *Mona*.

"The black-hearted swines! The cunning devils!" Todd gave vent to some very lurid language when he received the news. "That puts paid to to-morrow."

"Why, sir?" asked John.

"Because at the first sign of attack Anson would be placed well in the line of fire. No, we've got to think of something else. Curse it! Just as I had them nicely sewn up in a bag they slip out!"

"Will they—I mean, is Anson in danger?"

"I doubt it, boy. Not yet, anyway. I don't know what Smith will do, but he'll make some use of his capture. Thank heavens, you didn't show yourself or they'd have two hostages. I wonder whether they caught you accidentally or whether it was a planned job?"

Todd unloosed another button of his tropical jacket and switched on the fan. The door opened to admit Price. The Captain briefly explained the unfortunate capture of Anson while the newcomer found and lit a cigarette.

"Careless fools, the pair of them!" he said, including John with a wave of his hand. "However,

that is his misfortune. There's no need to alter the plan because of that."

The Skipper looked his disgust at the words. "There's something about you, Price, that makes me wish you had been in Anson's place. I don't think I'd bother to call off the attack under those circumstances."

Price flushed at the jibe.

"Remember your place, Captain. I'm paying for this trip."

"That's right enough and I'll keep my place; that is I'll give the orders which affect the ship and the crew."

"You're a soft-hearted sentimentalist. Do you fancy money is made by those methods?"

Todd felt like throwing the man out, but he held himself in check.

"The gold is frozen until such time as we get rid of the schooner, and that depends on getting Anson back. Start your brains working on those lines, mister."

"Anson is no business of mine," blustered Price.

"Don't be a fool! You charter this vessel and that includes the crew."

John caught the Captain's eye and nodded upwards. An idea had come to him, but he had no desire to discuss it in front of Price.

The two of them continued the original discussion in the chart-house, the door of which the Captain locked.

"Yes, John, what's on your mind?"

"I haven't considered the details, sir, but I thought of staging a diversion from, say, the shore side of the schooner while Plumley and I boarded her from the other side. In the confusion I fancy we could slip below and release Anson."

"It's an idea, but there are too many ifs. If anything went wrong, I should be left with no officers. The weakness is that we've no guarantee that the diversion would draw everybody to the rails. We can't afford to fail, John; there's too much at stake.—Who's that?"

He raised his voice at a knock on the door.

"Boat coming up with a flag of truce, sir." The door was unlocked and the Captain walked out on to the bridge. The boat was a hundred yards away and contained one man sculling with a white cloth tied to a short mast.

"H'm, this is where things become awkward. They're opening negotiations before we're ready for 'em. Throw a line to the boat and let him come alongside."

The sculler stood up and turned round, holding up a letter. He appeared to be a deckhand, probably Indian. The note was very brief, to the effect that they were given until morning to be gone, failing which, Anson would be the sufferer. The sculler did not wait for an answer, but leisurely turned his craft and pulled back to the schooner.

"Bluffing, I suppose?" suggested Price.

"No, mister, it's not bluff. I don't know Smith, but I know his type. He's got Indian blood in him

and he is not the bluffing sort. If we stay to breakfast we shall probably receive an ear neatly done up in a parcel."

"You're quitting, then? Running out?" The sneer was galling even to John, who was not responsible.

"It needs some consideration, Price, and we have until morning."

"Yes, but you've only the two choices. To take till morning is simply shirking the issue. If you're going to clear out tell us now." The bitter words came from Price as he stood with his hands deep in his pockets.

"We have till morning," repeated Todd, motioning to them both to leave the bridge.

CHAPTER V

THE ENEMY IS BEARDED

JOHN lay in his bunk that night and turned his mind to the position once again. Captain Todd had declined to discuss the affair any further and had paced his bridge for hour after hour. Fully dressed, since he knew he would never sleep, John decided that he must ask the Captain to allow him to take a chance. He had his plan ready, but he hesitated whether it would be accepted. Thinking any longer would get him nowhere, so he sprang up and rammed on his cap.

Walking quietly up the rungs of the bridge ladder he was heard by the Skipper, who was leaning across the rails staring into the night.

"Hello, youngster? I thought you were fast asleep by now. What's the matter? Too hot?"

"No, sir, there's only a few hours before dawn and I just had to ask for your decision. You'll probably be annoyed with me, but I can't sleep."

"No, I'm not annoyed; in fact, I'm glad just now to have somebody to talk to. The position is very simple. It's all a matter of character."

"Character?"

"Call it what you like. Anson trusts me exactly the same as I should trust him if the positions

were reversed. If I sacrifice him I can be fairly certain of a handful of gold. It doesn't sound very nice, does it?"

"It hadn't occurred to me that way, sir. I was thinking about Smith driving us away."

"Yes, that's pride, isn't it? Is pride worth a man's life? We clear out at dawn." The Captain's last words were spoken defiantly as though daring the world to challenge his decision.

"In that case, you won't object to me joining Anson?"

"What in the name——? Say that again."

"When you steam out in the morning, sir, I presume Smith will ferry Anson across to you?"

"Yes. I suppose so. He'll accept my word that I'm going, if that's what you mean."

"So if he had me a prisoner to-night as well as Anson, he would send us both back in the morning?"

"Yes, but——"

"Then, I propose to be captured. Don't you see, sir, we stand to lose nothing, and if I get a chance it's just possible I can get clear with Anson."

"No, John, I don't see."

"Anson was taken unawares. I propose to be taken prepared. I can secrete a few implements and I think I've a fair chance of making an escape. Call it a forlorn hope, if you like, but it costs us nothing. We're no worse off if it completely fails."

The match flared up as Todd lit his pipe, then a

long minute passed while John waited for his answer.

"It's a grand offer, youngster, and I accept. Go belew and fetch what you want, but just one word of caution. Stick to your original plan, and if it fails don't try anything desperate. Remember, you've sold me this scheme on the understanding that we shall be no worse off."

Twenty minutes later John was sculling through the darkness in the general direction of the schooner. He had no cut and dried plans—that was impossible—but he was determined that he would board the vessel as a free man or as a prisoner. Resting on his sculls, he turned to survey the position. Moving slower now, he picked up the masts silhouetted against the sky, and then a few more strokes took him past the schooner until he could reach over and grab the anchor chain.

He could see no lights and there was no sound beyond the lapping of the water against the hull. Swarming the chain, he scrambled over the low bulwarks and lay flat on the deck. As far as he could see there was nobody near him, and the anchor watch was probably sited in the bows. A yellow light shone through the glass of a deck-light which he guessed to be the saloon transom. Crouched, he crept forward and peered through the glass. From his viewpoint he could only see a table, but the open transom enabled him to hear voices speaking in Spanish.

John tried to visualise the interior arrangements

of the vessel from the position of the saloon. There was no knowing whether Anson would be held in the forecastle or aft, but he preferred the latter idea. Creeping forward, he made for the assumed position of the companion. So far he had progressed better than he had anticipated, but his aim was to free Anson, and if it could be done like this, so much the better. He pushed the companion doors gently with his hand and a faint light from below threw a pale glow on the steps.

Sucking in a deep breath John put a foot down, holding the sides of the companion. At that moment a grip took him by the collar of the jacket and he hung suspended. The more he wriggled the tighter became the grip and the harder the cloth dug into his windpipe. Confused and half-strangled, he was suddenly released and fell in a heap at the bottom of the stairs.

"Oh, it's the young man that Todd brought aboard?"

John received a mild kick in the ribs and was gruffly told to stand up. The saloon was lit by a swinging oil lamp and was furnished with a thick carpet and a number of red and yellow cushions. Blinking around the room, he was astonished at the garish effect. Smith was dressed in an open yellow silk shirt and sat at a circular table with a ferocious-looking Mexican. The man who had effected the capture stood by the stairs, awaiting orders. John rubbed his elbow, which ached from the fall, then swallowed to ease his throat.

"Did you suppose we kept no watch?" Smith smirked at his companion. "Your boat was seen five minutes ago. What were you after?"

"I had a row with Captain Todd. I wasn't after anything." John spoke in a sulky, hangdog manner, but Smith was very pleased with himself.

"Bah!" sneered the Mexican. "Tie him up with the other and waste no time."

"Wait, Juan." Smith raised his hand. "What was the quarrel about?"

"I wouldn't dive during dark," replied John.

"Oh, you're the diver? Very interesting. Have you found anything below?" The question was airily posed, but John could see the excitement, especially on Juan's face.

"What are you going to do with me? Why should I answer your questions?" he returned.

"Ho, ho! He wants to know why, Juan. Come here, come close to the table."

Smith's hand shot out as John walked forward and gripped him below the elbow. His sleeve was pushed up and Smith drew a knife from his sash. It was probably bluff, but the knife looked devilishly business-like.

"Why should you answer my questions, eh?" The point of the knife rested on the boy's arm and moved slowly down towards the wrist. John only felt a pricking sensation as though the hairs on his arm were being pulled. The knife was removed and, as he watched, the blood came to the surface

and showed in a thin, red trickle. The skin had been cut very slightly and not deep enough to open the flesh. This was not on his programme and he hurriedly pulled down his sleeve.

"I've only been down once, so I haven't had a chance of finding anything."

"Only once? Do you know what you were looking for?"

There seemed no point in denying the information since they evidently knew the answer. The schooner had obviously arrived with good reason.

"Yes. Gold."

Smith watched him like a cat.

"You quarrelled with Todd and took a boat. You rowed across the lagoon." John nodded his head. "Then you crept aboard like a thief. Why didn't you hail us?"

"I—er—I didn't intend boarding you. My main idea was to keep out of Todd's way until dawn. When I saw your hull I suppose I was sort of curious. It's difficult to explain my motives since I never really had any."

"He's lying," said Juan.

"No, I don't think so," put in Smith. "A liar could think of a more convincing story than that. It's very thin, which is a point in its favour."

The other snorted and moved away to the cushioned bench which ran along one side of the cabin.

"What are Todd's intentions? Is he pulling out?"

"I don't know. He doesn't discuss his affairs with me."

"It'll be a bad day for Anson if he doesn't."

"For me, too, I suppose?"

"I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind about you. It might pay me to keep you, especially if I can lay hands on your diving suit. You're using one of those small Jap suits, aren't you?" The man's knowledge was amazing, thought John.

"Yes."

"Alamo!" called Smith to the half-breed standing watching by the stairs. "Run through his pockets."

The man felt round and drew out a few coins, a pocket compass, a handkerchief and a penknife.

"Take the knife away, then lock him in the lazarette. When the *Mona* leaves, I'll release you, young fellow, maybe, and I may make you an offer. Until then, keep quiet or I'll see that you're unable to make a noise."

Smith made a gesture which John was unable to translate, but he guessed that it would be something unpleasant.

"Captain Todd won't leave without me."

"Huh, you've just admitted he doesn't know where you are. Take him away."

John broke into a sweat as he was pushed along by the half-breed. If Smith offered Anson in the morning and denied any knowledge of himself what could Todd do? If his plan of escape failed

to-night, Todd would be in a worse position than before. The possibility of Smith behaving in this fashion had never occurred to him. The cupboard door slammed and the key turned.

Feeling round the walls, John measured the space as three feet by about four and a half. There was no air vent as far as he could discern, but the bottom of the door was half an inch from the floor. Groping with his fingers, he explored the lock and his spirits went up with a rush as he realised that it was screwed to the inside of the door. Pulling up his trouser leg, he unstrapped the combination tool and felt for the screwdriver. The air in the enclosed space was stuffy and he paused to wipe the handkerchief across his face; then rubbing his hands down his legs, he fumbled for the screws of the lock.

His fingertips found three, but he had the greatest difficulty in getting his driver into the slot of the screw-head. After several attempts the blade seemed to be in position and he applied turning pressure. The blade slipped out. Trembling with excitement, he tried again and this time the blade slipped across before he even turned.

John stopped and tried to quieten his nerves. Instead of giving himself time to settle down, he had rushed frantically at the task. There were at least four hours before dawn and he made himself stand loosely against the wall with his hands in his pockets. Five minutes passed at a guess, then he laid a hand gently against his face to test its steady-

ness. With slow deliberation this time he searched for the screw slot and calmly inserted the blade of his driver. He leaned on it and turned. Success! Again he rested for a spell and then the second and third screws were withdrawn, permitting the lock plate to slip back.

He had noticed on his way along from the saloon that they had passed two doors opening off the corridor and that the lazarette appeared to have no exit other than the door through which they had entered. Most likely, the two doors belonged to cabins—maybe Smith's and Juan's? In that case, it was unlikely that Anson was in either, and yet if that were so he must be lodged forward. For some reason John was sure that he was aft and he leaned against the lazarette wall, considering the matter.

The corridor led past the two cabins and opened into the saloon. So far as he could judge, that was the only exit from where he stood, although there was probably a decklight above the lazarette, but it was too dark to see. He crept past the cabins and carefully and slowly turned the saloon door handle. A thin crack showed a dim light and he ventured to open it further. The lamp had been turned down and Juan lay, presumably asleep, on the cushioned bench. He now thought he had the answer. Smith must use one of the cabins and the other, whatever its normal use, now housed Anson. The problem was, which one?

Closing the saloon door again, he felt his way

back to the first door and listened at the panel. He moved away and listened at the second. There was no sound from either, but a mistake now would wreck everything. If he entered one of the cabins and woke Smith the scheme was finished, but, on the other hand, he could not stand and dither in the corridor for the rest of the night. A block frapped against the mast and the hull creaked as the schooner moved to a puff of wind. He wiped his brow again, then made his decision to take the doors as they came. Turning the first handle, he pushed the door back and listened, then dropped to his knees and crawled forward on his hands. It was a slow business, but he finally reached what was obviously a bunk. Lifting his body and listening, he lightly placed a hand on the blankets, but they were empty. His dilemma was worse now than before.

There was nothing for it but to go forward, although he realised that the second cabin must contain Smith or Anson, but not both. Grasping the handle of the second door, he could feel his hand trembling with excitement and he moistened his lips. It was locked. He gulped, then came near to panic. Sitting on the floor of the corridor, he leaned against the door and the back of his head lightly bumped the panel.

"Who's that?" The panel had muffled the words, but he had caught the sound. Could it be Smith? It was most unlikely he would have used those words, so he risked a soft tap.

"Who is it?" came the answer in a loud whisper.

"This is Mayne."

"Mayne? Good lad! I'm locked in. Can you open the door?"

"No, there's no key. If I push a flat screwdriver underneath can you undo the fastening?"

There was a pause while Anson explored the lock.

"Yes. Go ahead."

The driver needed some forcing, but John finally pushed it through with his foot. There was a metallic scuffling and John fancied the job must have taken half an hour. It was probably only five minutes, but time becomes distorted under such circumstances. The door swung inwards and the two instinctively gripped hands.

"Now what?" asked Anson, taking John's presence for granted.

"I don't know. I've a boat hitched to the stern if we can make it. I'm bothered, though, as to where Smith is. Juan is asleep in the saloon."

"He's not in his cabin? Then probably he uses a mattress on deck for coolness. First thing is to get on deck."

"All right. We'd better take things as they come, but I shall try for the boat if we get separated. In that case, presumably we swim for it?"

Anson was removing his coat and shoes. "Yes, make for the beach and get inland," he said.

"You ready?" whispered John.

"Half a mo'! Have you any guns?"

"No, nothing." There was no time to explain his presence and both were keyed up and longing to get on deck.

John led the way and opened the saloon door. Juan was in the same position, lying in the shadow of the dim light. The companion steps were directly opposite to where they stood and only five paces separated them from the rungs. John was almost to the top when Anson slipped, jerked himself back into position on the treads, and dislodged the screwdriver from his pocket. Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. The noise was not loud, but it was strange. A sleeper is accustomed to the usual ship-board noises, but this was different. Juan turned over and with one bound was on his feet in the middle of the cabin.

John pulled at the doors of the companion, which opened quite smoothly under normal conditions, but hurrying made fingers fumble. Anson dropped off the ladder and John heard the heavy smack of flesh landing on flesh. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Juan stagger backwards from a blow to the face and Anson spring to the rungs. He tumbled through the hatchway to the deck, plunged forward in the darkness, bumped his knee on an obstruction, and clambered on top of what appeared to be a large locker. He was already breathless, although he had only climbed a short ladder.

He heard rather than saw Anson spring through

the opening and dart off to the left of the mainmast. Shouts were coming from below and voices were heard from forward. Sliding forward from his perch, he crawled to the port scuppers, looked up, then saw above him the standing rigging of the mainmast. Almost without thinking he leaped on the bulwarks, swarmed some ten feet above the deck, then flattened himself against the ratlines. The schooner was now in an uproar, with men rushing aft from the forecastle, while Smith and Juan alternately cursed and shouted orders. There was no sign of Anson and John tried to think of the next best move he could make. Suddenly, two electric torches flashed out and their beams began flickering along the deck.

"Some of you men over to port here, and everybody face forward. The rats have made for the bows!"

The shout came from Smith as he stood flashing his torch. A string of obscenities broke from Juan as he wiped the blood from his mouth. A row of deck-lights flashed on and the schooner was lit from end to end.

"There he goes!" A revolver cracked and then another at the leaping figure near the foremast. The smell of powder wafted up and, fortunately, most of the smoke. A knot of men rushed after Anson, and at that moment for some strange reason Smith looked up and stared straight into John's eyes. He smiled, but it was a most unpleasant smile. His right arm with the smoking

gun moved up, and then John knew it was time to go.

Without looking, he sprang backwards into space and hit the water on his back. Swinging his head down, he heard another shot from the gun as he fought his way under water. He kicked with all his strength till he came to the keel, swam under, then floated up the other side. Listening quietly, he knew there was a chance that Smith might think him shot, and he trod water.

"Not that boat, you fools! There's one at the stern!"

There was too much shouting for John to hear clearly what was being done, and then suddenly the machine gun spoke. They fired a burst of ten shots, but he knew he was not the target. Fearful to move until the hunt was called off, the boy floated silently, then realised that the current was taking him slowly down towards the stern of the ship. There was nothing to grip and no handhold. Turning on his face, he submerged and swam hard under water until he felt certain that the stern was well past. Again he surfaced and, seeing that he was clear of her counter, decided to strike out for the shore. If Anson was safe he would find him on the beach, but he remembered the machine-gun burst; the Mate might be no more.

Turning quietly to avoid splashing, he swam for the shore until the water shallowed and he touched bottom. It was a moonless night and the stars,

although brilliant, gave no light under the trees beyond the foreshore. The choice now lay between risking the beach being unguarded and entering the thick undergrowth which would delay progress. It looked uninviting and forbidding, and although the island housed no wild beasts, there was something eerie about it. Hesitating for some minutes John finally compromised by walking along the fringe of the brushwood.

Progress was slow, and in the darkness, for all his care, occasionally he caught his foot in a straggling root and pitched forward. Thorns caught at his clothes and scratched his face and hands. Suddenly the schooner doused her lights and the sudden effect of darkness was startling. He told himself that his position was exactly the same as before, but the loneliness had increased with the darkness. His fears were groundless, and there was no sign of any pursuit, but neither was there any sign of Anson. There was nothing to be done but continue and hope that the other was ahead of him. Soon, the lights of the *Mona* increased from pinpoints and he realised that the adventure was drawing to an end and that he had probably failed.

John's hail to the *Mona* was unnecessary, since one of her boats lay waiting a few yards from the shore, and to his joy it contained Anson and Plumley. Congratulating each other on the dual escape, they rowed across the lagoon and boarded the ship. Todd and Fraser were on the main deck to greet

them, and John saw two of the crew wearing broad grins.

"So the wee laddie has returned?" was the Chief's greeting.

With a round of handshakes the party went below to the saloon where between mouthfuls of food and coffee the story was told. Anson, it appeared, had slipped quietly overboard and had struck out for the shore. The machine-gun fire had gone well over his head and he assumed that it had then jammed.

"Fortunate for you, Anson," said Todd. "I'm not sure that I hadn't the worst job of all, waiting here. I dared not move down until I was sure of the position, and to send a boat in the dark would have helped nobody."

"What now, sir?" asked John, putting down his cup.

"I don't think we can improve on the previous scheme. We'll drop down the lagoon in the morning and show them a thing or two."

John looked round the saloon and noticed Price's absence, then saw that the skipper had read his thoughts.

"The owner likes his sleep." The rest of the party drifted off and John was left alone with the Captain.

"Do you think, sir, there's anything fishy about Price's story of the gold?"

"Which particular part?" The Skipper's eyebrows went up and he munched a biscuit.

"It's nothing to do with me, but I can't quite see where Smith comes in. What connection can he have with Japan?"

Todd wiped the crumbs from his mouth. "The whole thing reeks of fish. We shall probably never know the whole truth of the matter, but bear in mind we have no more right to the gold than anybody else. Assuming that it is, or was, Jap gold, I should reckon that Smith got his information from the same source as Price. In other words, they're both rogues."

"And so are we, presumably?"

Todd stroked his nose and looked piercingly at John.

"Well, yes, and then no. Should we salvage the gold and give it back to Japan?"

"No, I don't think so."

"If we gave it to Uncle Sam I don't fancy the world would be any the better. In that case, I don't see any reason why Price shouldn't have it—less our agreed share for—er—expenses. You see, youngster, it's not as bad as you think. We're not responsible for Price's morals, are we?"

"No. I see what you mean. If we don't do the job, then somebody else will?"

"Precisely. It may not be good or rightful thinking, but we are only acting as agents. We don't lay claim to the gold."

John studied his feet for a moment. "I'm not really thinking of that aspect, sir, but what I had

in mind was Price's apparent fear of anybody knowing we were after the stuff."

"I don't quite follow."

"Don't you think perhaps he's scared of the Japs? Suppose they are after the stuff and he knows it?"

"You mean, John, we may shortly have another visitor to the island?"

"Yes, and possibly in an official or legal capacity."

"Hm, hm! That would complicate life considerably. Confound you! Are you trying to rattle me? To see somebody else steam in and lift the gold would be more than I could bear."

"Price could give us some useful information if he would talk, sir."

"I still don't see that it is vital to us." Todd was not dull, but his mind was firmly fixed on the sea led.

"If we knew the real history of the gold we should be in a much stronger position. At the present time, if a Jap showed his nose in here we should tend to stand back. Do you agree?"

"We-ll"—the word was long-drawn—"we might *tend*, I'll give you that, young man."

"But if we knew who held the right to the gold then we might say to the visitor that first come is first served. It's what's called the psychological aspect."

"Psycho——? Well, I don't know about that, but I see your drift now. We've no more reason

to be scared of a bunch of Japs than anybody else?"

"Yes, sir."

"Leave it to me, John; and now get to bed for an hour."

CHAPTER VI

BATTLE FOR POSITION IN THE LAGOON

MORNING brought a complete change on the scene. The schooner had gone and the *Mona* had undisputed right to her anchorage. Plumley had taken the watch before sunrise and he telephoned the Skipper as soon as he discovered the position. John slept late and was awakened by the steward bringing coffee to his cabin.

Hurriedly dressing, he went up to the bridge, where he found a cluster of people discussing the occurrence. John was puzzled, since Smith was not the sort of man to lose heart at a minor setback like that of last night, and he suspected something behind the disappearance.

"What do you know?" asked Anson.

"I don't. What does the Old Man say about it?"

"I fancy he's a bit put out at missing the scrap he had planned. You've never seen him in action, John."

Inside the chart-house the talk was on the same subject. Price was in a bad temper, and John kept away.

"Why should they pull out?" asked Price.

"Why?" repeated Todd. "Because they're a

bunch of yellow crooks. They know me and they know when the going's good."

"Bah!" sneered Price. "We've no guarantee of that. You may have a reputation for toughness around these parts, but Smith is no schoolgirl."

"Then, why have they gone?" Todd thundered and smote the chart table.

"Possibly for reinforcements," answered Price. "Now's your chance. Why waste time like this when we might be diving?"

"Plenty of time for that. I suppose, mister, you've got some sort of title to the gold?" Todd's face was childishly innocent as he posed the question.

"What are you getting at now?"

"I was thinking that if a gunboat popped in for a look round, things might be tricky. What do you say?"

"I say it's none of your business!" Price made it plain from his expression that he was not prepared to discuss the matter.

Todd shrugged. "All right. In that event I should quietly withdraw and wave good-bye to the gunboat."

"Who's yellow now, Todd?"

"Withdrawal would be commonsense. I once spent a night in the jail at Acapulco, and those Mexicans have a poor idea of comfort."

"Mexico has nothing to do with this island."

"I know, but there's not much to choose between these Central American states in that respect. If

you had a bit of paper or some good story I'd stay around and bluff 'em."

Price was not to be drawn.

"The position doesn't arise, Skipper. There's no gunboat here or likely to be, so let's get on with the diving."

Todd tapped on the glass panel of the door to attract John's attention.

"Come in and let's arrange something about lifting the gold." John took a chair and listened. "Now, Price, having located the gold by the biggest stroke of luck I've ever come across, it remains to get it up."

"That's your business."

"Precisely, precisely, and I'm glad you realise the point."

"Oh, get on, Todd. Don't waste time."

"I've based my calculations on £5 an ounce, and although that's a very low figure, I take it that the stuff will need to be cashed with some—er—discretion?" Todd rolled the words round his mouth in anticipation of his wealth.

"I'm not concerned with that, Skipper, but call it £5 if you like."

"Good! Then I reckon the weight as around 5,800 pounds. John says he guesses the bars at about twelve pounds each, so that makes the total very roughly 500 bars. My idea is to send down a net, let John fill it, then draw the stuff up by winch."

"So you'll anchor over the wreck, sir?" suggested John.

"Yes, but I shall carry the anchors well clear so that we shall be moored rather than anchored. You will dive from the deck, which will simplify the pumping and also permit me to keep an eye on things in general. Fraser is busy now strengthening a net which should hold 1,000 pounds."

"That makes six trips," put in John.

"Hm! It depends on how long it takes you to fill a net. As I understand it, you need another ladder to take you to the ground floor, as it were."

Price nibbled his finger-nails and glanced from one to the other.

"Is there no way of breaking into the hold at seabed level?" he asked.

"Of course not," replied Todd irritably. "There's no underwater cutting plant and nobody who could operate it if there were. The job will take time, but there's no other way."

"No," said John, "it means manhandling two, or at most three, bars at a time, carrying them through the hatch, and shoving them in the net. I could take the net inside with me, but you'd never hoist it out."

"That's true. We must have a straight purchase."

The discussion on ways and means was closed and the Captain manœuvred his ship to a position immediately over the wreck. The place from which John had been diving was buoyed, but the jockeying took a considerable time before the skipper was satisfied.

The *Mona* now lay much nearer the shore. The diving gear was rigged, the pumps tested, and John made six dives, but the total quantity raised that day was only eighty bars. The work was laborious and slow. He found that he could only handle two bars at a time and they had to be taken up his ladder, along the horizontal ladder, and then dropped into the net.

Todd was delighted with the progress made, but Price became more and more critical. He pooh-poohed the necessity for John to have hourly rests between each dive. He might well have restrained his impatience, however, since it made no impression on the Captain. By afternoon John was quite at home in his diving suit and would willingly have done more, but the Skipper was adamant. He had dived many times himself and knew the dangers. The pressure of water affected the blood pressure and the breathing, and, with John not having reached his physical maturity, Todd declined to permit any risks.

The youngster could never remember clearly what happened at dinner that night. His appetite was poor and Todd kept pressing titbits on him. There was no fresh milk, but he was almost forced to drink a whole tin of preserved. He had the greatest difficulty in keeping his eyes open and much of the conversation went by him.

"It will take another week at this rate," said Price.

"That depends on the weather," added Fraser.

"Weather?" Price swung round to Todd. "Might that hold us up?"

The Captain nodded. "Possibly. The Pacific can belie its name, particularly at this time of year."

"Then, we must do better to-morrow."

"Yes, Price, we can extend times a little. I reckon that to-day's haul just about represents my share."

"Nonsense! You're entitled to your percentage of it. That's all."

The Captain chuckled while the steward came in and cleared the table.

"We'll have it all up in good time, but to-day's little lot is mine and the crew's. I've even stowed it away safely."

Price rose as though to demand satisfaction, then thought better of it and sat down again.

"You've a darned queer way of doing business, Todd."

"Ay, mon, he's queer in many ways."

Anson sniggered at the Chief's sally and both were favoured with a glare. John opened his eyes and shook himself. Light footsteps on the companion ladder came to his ears and he wondered what everybody was laughing about. The saloon was clouded thick with tobacco smoke when a quiet voice spoke:

"Put 'em up and stay still! Get 'em up!"

The voice was Smith's and he stood at the foot of the ladder with an automatic in each hand.

Juan and another man jumped down beside him and the three of them walked towards the table. Smith nodded towards the pantry.

"Tie up the cook and lock him in. Juan, run through their clothes for guns while I cover them."

It looked to John very near checkmate. His sleepiness had disappeared and he sat up, tense. Smith took a chair in the corner and rested the guns on his knees.

"Well, gentlemen, it was simpler than I expected. Not a shot fired. Surely, Todd, you never thought I had gone for good?"

The Skipper had sat at first with a scowling face, but it now broadened into a grin.

"Foxing, eh, Smith? You lay off the island and dropped back at sundown?" It was unlikely, he knew, since he had posted a guard at the lagoon headland.

"Simpler than that. I anchored the other side of the island. You know, Todd, you must be losing your touch."

"Never mind that. Let's hear what you've called for. It wasn't for supper, presumably?"

Smith smiled, with the knowledge that he held all the cards.

"No, though it's nice to be welcomed like this. I always think it's better to be helpful when you can't be otherwise."

John glanced round at his party. Fraser was sucking his pipe unconcernedly, Anson was gripping the table, and Price stared venomously at

Smith. The Captain appeared quite at ease, his banter sounding quite genuine.

"How much gold did you lift to-day?"

"Gold? Give us a chance, Smith. The old wreck needs quite a lot of exploration."

"You lifted a bagful of gold by your derrick. I saw it come up through my glasses. Come clean, Todd."

"That was 'a box the boy found. We lifted it, sure we did, and the durned thing was full of rubbish. You must have done some diving in your time, Smith, and you know the days that are wasted in finding your way about. Gold! Do you think we are magicians?"

"Maybe."

"Well, seeing's believing, or so they say. Take a look round the old tub, and any gold you find you can have. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Todd, you're good, but not good enough. What I saw through the glasses was no box. You've slipped up."

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. John felt that, had the Skipper been alone, he might yet have bluffed Smith, but the faces of the rest of the party were vulnerable.

"If you want to waste your time——?"

"Never mind about my time. I don't aim to go routing round this old hooker in the dark, so it can wait till morning. You will all stay here where you are for the night, and no tricks! Don't try coming on deck or you may get shot. Todd, you're a man

of sense, so explain to your gang the advantage of behaving. See you in the morning."

The party withdrew and for some moments there was silence while Price smoked furiously.

"Mister blinking Todd, it seems to me that your reputation on the coast is somewhat over-rated. How do you propose getting out of this jam? It strikes me that we were caught on the hop in a pretty elementary way."

Fraser pointedly ignored the unhelpful words of Price and turned to the Captain.

"They picked their time well, sir. Nearly everybody was below."

"Yes, Chief," replied the Skipper. "It was simple enough and I never expected an overland attack. As far as Smith's warning is concerned, I should take the man at his word, and anybody who feels like taking a peek on deck will certainly stop some lead. We've got to get clear by cunning."

"Will they locate the gold aboard, sir?" asked John.

"If they're clever enough. There are only two men who know where it is. However, let's consider our chances. First of all, Smith wants the gold, and we'll start from that point. Assuming he has a diver and the necessary gear, he can hold us prisoners and go ahead. That position wouldn't worry me unduly, but I fancy he won't stop at that."

"Meaning?" put in Price.

"Meaning that he'll probably make use of our

diver as well. Remember that he saw a load of bricks hoisted in, so obviously Mayne has the gold located. Follow?"

"I won't dive for him!" John was truculent.

"I fear, young man, you won't get away as easily as that. Smith has ways and means of enforcing his wishes. Some of the Indian methods of persuasion can be very painful. No, I can stop it, but it puts me in a hole."

"In what way, sir?" asked Anson.

"By wrecking the diving suit. It's hanging in the drying room next door. A few slits with a knife and hey presto!"

"Confound it!" burst out Price. "That puts paid to our own diving! If we can outwit them we shall be snookered ourselves."

Fraser chuckled quietly at Price's expression.

"This is a council of war and we may as well face all the facts," broke in Todd. "What you say, Price, is true enough, but if we allow Mayne to dive with them the gold comes up twice as fast. Which is it to be?"

• A slight smile passed over the Skipper's face as he caught Fraser's eye. Price writhed in his chair at the dilemma they faced, since the idea of losing the gold at this stage was unbearable to him.

"Seems to me, sir, that we've got till morning to decide whether to wreck the suit or not," went on the mate.

"That is the position, Anson, and if any-

body's got an idea how to break out, let's hear it. Yes, Mr. Price, I see you have something to say?"

"I say we must do it to-night."

"Oh, you do? And are you willing to lead the party?" Price shrank back at the suggestion.

"I can see that you're not. Can't say that I blame you, since it's a hundred to one on getting a bellyful of lead. I'm going to put a proposition to the meeting, bearing in mind my position as captain." Todd paused and looked round the table. "This is it: we wreck the diving gear and allow Smith and company to do their worst. They won't bother us if we leave them alone."

"Of all the yellow-bellies! That's throwing up the sponge! I thought better of you than that, Todd."

"I'm quite ready to listen to your proposition, Price. What is it?"

The situation in the saloon was grim, but John was enjoying the scene better than a play. Price was livid at the Skipper's suggestion, but for the life of him could see no way out.

"I'm waiting, Price."

"To do as you suggest means that we have only one-sixth of the gold to share between us. You're not serious, Todd?"

"I don't quite follow you, Mr. Price. The sixth already aboard belongs to the ship and your share is still down below."

Price's eyes goggled and his upper lip drew back,

showing an irregular line of yellow teeth. He was beyond speech for a few moments.

"I'll put it to the vote if you like, Price?"

There was little doubt how the company would vote. John felt quite sorry for the man as he sat helpless and dispirited.

"That is the course of action any sensible captain would take," went on Todd; "but I have a certain name, a certain reputation to keep up. Smith will never beat me!"

Price's head came up as though he had been relieved from death.

"I'm willing to fight this matter out," said the Captain, "but on two conditions. One is that you agree the gold raised belongs to the ship." Price nodded his head. "The other is a full statement regarding the history of the wreck. You can tell me that privately. Agreed?"

There was no argument. The Captain held all the trumps and Price was forced to play. John felt a wave of relief at the Captain's determination to fight, although in his opinion the gold counted far less than the indignity of being Smith's prisoners. Fraser had scarcely changed his expression, and as far as John could judge, seemed to have been cognisant the whole time of the Captain's real intentions.

Price and the Skipper walked across the saloon to a porthole and stood conversing in whispers for some minutes. The Chief knocked the dottle from his pipe and stretched.

"And now that the talking's all finished perhaps we shall see some action. Laddie, talking is a dry business."

Having attended to his dryness, Mr. Fraser carefully removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Todd came back to the table, raising his eyebrows at his engineer.

"Now what, Mr. Fraser?"

"I've an idea, sir, and it depends on Smith's crew consisting mainly of half-breeds and Indians."

"They are mostly," Todd replied.

"Ay, then we'll scare the life out of them. The idea is to take their minds off the companion hatch for just one minute, and in that time we can bust it open and break out on deck."

"Go on. How do we scare them?"

"Cap'n, we have the very thing next door. The diving suit is well dusted with French chalk? It should be, since it's mostly rubber."

"Yes? What then?" anxiously asked Todd.

"We'll tie it to a broom-handle and push it up through the companion light. If that doesn't scare them to the marrow my name is no' Angus Fraser."

Captain Todd stared into space for a moment, then his eyes lit up.

"Yes, that might do the trick. A white ghost with a round, enlarged head suddenly poking itself out of the saloon should have some effect. Anson, fetch the suit and another box of chalk."

During the next ten minutes the ghost was pre-

pared and final instructions issued by the Skipper. There was little they could really plan as their movements depended on the enemy. It was infernally risky and harebrained, but there was just a sporting chance of success.

The saloon light was extinguished and the Captain, engineer, and Price stood on the companion ladder in that order. The hatch was locked, but Todd figured that a smart blow would suffice to burst open the door. John and Anson stood on top of the table with their ghost ready to be pushed up through the glass. Everything depended on the hatch guard being drawn away from his post. Unless that occurred, Captain Todd would burst through and receive the magazine of a pistol in his body.

Following the successful capture of the *Mona*, Smith had ordered his schooner round to the lagoon and she now lay moored with a line from the steamer. It had been a daring but simple attack. As Todd had said and Smith had expected, the thought of danger from the landward side had never suggested itself.

The *Mona's* hatches had been secured, her officers and crew were imprisoned below, and only a few guards were left aboard against emergency. In the cabin of the schooner Smith and Juan sat discussing the position.

"Why the hell didn't you think of bringing diving gear?" growled the half-breed.

"Because, my dear Juan, I never intended this to be any more than a reconnaissance. You know that as well as I do. Nobody was more surprised than you to find Todd in possession."

Juan grudgingly assented. "That's as it may be. The point is, what happens now?"

"The boy can dive for us."

"You say that with some certainty. Supposing he won't?"

"Don't be a fool, Juan. Have you ever met anybody likely to argue to the point of declining? A kid like that will crumple at the first threat. Now listen. First thing in the morning you will take a party and thoroughly search the *Mona* for gold. I can't be certain, but I think they pulled something up in that net. Anyway, I leave that to you."

"Why not leave a guard on the *Mona* and return to Panama for proper gear? It might be quicker in the long run. We could bring cutting plant, too. Suppose the stuff is locked away in a strong room?"

Smith considered the question calmly, then shook his head.

"No, I don't agree, Juan. If cutting plant had been necessary, why didn't Todd bring it?"

"Perhaps he did."

"All right; then, it's there waiting for us."

They were a queer pair. Smith, for all his English name, was of Mexican parentage, dark and swarthy, while Juan was a child of Panama. He had no recollection of any parents, and his earliest

memories went back to an Indian village. He was tall and slim, while Smith was plump and short. Though unlike in appearance, they were well matched in lack of scruples.

It was nearly midnight when they came on deck and Smith pulled away the waterproof cover from his mattress while the other stood smoking a final cigarette. Both turned their heads to the steamer as the sepulchral noise came to their ears. It was a muffled, eerie sound, a deep, hollow groan, and then in the brilliant starlight the apparition rose into view. The enlarged head of the monster waved about unsteadily on its shoulders and its colour in that light was ghastly. The two sentries on the *Mona's* afterdeck, both ignorant half-breeds, dropped their pistols and ran forward in sheer terror. Again the ghostly figure spoke and Juan grasped the schooner's rail to steady himself.

Smith snapped shut his gaping lower jaw as he collected his wits. He shouted a stream of orders, but it was too late. A rending, tearing sound followed, and then figures burst through the splintered hatch doors. The ghost tumbled sideways and then more figures wriggled through the companion light. Too late, Smith realised his error in not mooring alongside. He, with the bulk of his crew, was isolated from the steamer at the critical moment.

A fusillade of shots rang out, but the light was against good marksmanship, and the figures moved too rapidly to offer much of a target. The guards on

the *Mona* were helpless. Terrified of the supernatural monster, they had fled forward and the whole six of them were dithering below the fore-castle head. Todd and Anson had picked up the dropped pistols, but the Chief Engineer made the main attack. Wielding an enormous iron bar, he used it like a flail and the terrible weapon searched out one victim after another.

John, clambering through the glass light, was armed only with a knife and realised that in spite of the guards there was greater danger from the schooner. Dropping to the deck, he sheltered below the bulwarks and ran to the stern. He hacked away at the schooner's mooring line, then made for the engine-room hatch. This was nearly midships and behind the screaming, yelling pandemonium. Throwing back the bolts, he shouted down the hatch and was nearly overborne by the rush of the black gang.

"Is that you, Mayne?" It was the Captain's voice.

"Yes, sir, I've cut the schooner's mooring rope, but I don't know how the current is setting her."

"Get to the bridge and take her ahead. Hey! You black devils!" He roared at the engine-room staff, who were milling around. "Steam! Give me steam! Get below!"

As John turned for the bridge ladder he saw the port side of the schooner as she swung off with the current. Racing up the ladder, he gained the bridge and rang the telegraph to "Stand by". There was

no reply for some seconds and he repeated the order. Then came the stream of lead. The schooner had unmasked her machine-gun and the bullets were spattering around the bridge.

John ducked, then sidled round to where he could see astern through a gun-slit. Somebody—it looked like Anson—was working on the stern anchor cable and he flushed hot with the realisation that he had attempted to move the ship before receiving clearance from the deck.

"All clear fore and aft, sir!" came Anson's shout.

John dodged back to the wheel, received an answer from the engine-room, then rang his engines up for "half-speed ahead." Gripping the wheel-spokes with feet wide apart to reduce his height, he felt the wind from another burst of fire. The plates beneath his feet trembled and he knew they were moving. It was slow at first, and then as he applied helm the bows gradually swung. Captain Todd loomed up beside him, panting for breath and with a streak of blood running down the side of his face.

- "John, you must do your best--keep her clear of the schooner—use both screws to manœuvre her. Smith will try to rush us. Keep him off until we're ready. Can you manage alone? The crew is jumpy and I must stay on deck." The words came jerkily, but John was equal to the occasion. He quickly saw the point.

"Aye, aye, sir. I shall manage."

Todd was gone before the reply was finished.

Battle for Position in the Lagoon 109

The firing was now intermittent and came from both machine-gun and rifles. The schooner would now be under control and Smith would see that the firing was more accurate. Captain Todd had to organise his defences before much of a reply could be expected. In the meantime, John was in the responsible position of keeping clear water between the two ships.

Although his bridge was armoured it was a difficult task, since Smith had trained a sniper on the *Mona's* bridge and every now and again a bullet whistled past his ears. To manœuvre the ship he must look over the coaming, so it was a sheer matter of luck how soon he would be shot.

The situation was most unpleasant, but he had his orders. He shot a glance ahead and realised that he was drawing close to the far end of the lagoon. The schooner lay on his port quarter and he could hear the chugging of her auxiliary engine. It shouldn't be difficult to out-jockey the schooner with her single screw. John stopped his engines and threw them both full astern. Under full power the way was promptly taken off and the plates under his feet vibrated with the drive of the engines. He saw the tops of some trees moving away from him and knew they were travelling fast. A moment later a bullet smacked against the bridge armour, then ricocheted off the coaming. That was near and he ducked again, then threw a hurried glance at the enemy.

She was also travelling astern, but, due to the

action of the single screw, was sidling crabwise towards the *Mona*. This was an unexpected complication and he was bothered how to deal with it. He needed to be the other side of the schooner—that is, on the port side. A glance was hazarded astern and then at the distance between his starboard side and the beach. Confound it! He was too close to the shore! The tide or current was flowing and would set him closer and closer.

Handling a ship is far more difficult than a small launch, since, although the principle is the same, there is a much longer time-lag between the giving of an order and the consequent result. John had to make rapid and accurate calculations as to strength of tide, swing from momentum, power of engines and degree of helm required. All would interact and react on each other. The schooner was now ahead of him and lying across the lagoon at an angle. He moved still further astern, then took his way off, but the position was now becoming acute and he was in danger of being hemmed in. There was room for him to pass ahead or astern of the enemy, provided he obtained enough start of Smith; otherwise there could easily be a collision.

He must go ahead—there was no choice on that point, but was it to be port or starboard of the enemy? "Full ahead both!" The screws threshed and the ship shook with the vibration. She was moving forward. "Stop port engine!" He twirled his wheel to port and waited with dry mouth for

the *Mona's* bows to swing. Round she came slowly, and then he saw the phosphorescence from the schooner's wake. She, too, was moving and pushing her stern across his path. "Full ahead both!" He could do no more now than hope that his hurried calculations would give them the necessary clearance.

Ping! A bullet zipped past and seared the tip of his ear like a red-hot coal. He put up his hand and felt the stinging flesh-wound. The *Mona* was driving forward now and he could see that they would clear for most of the ship's length. The enemy, though, was also moving faster now and possibly her stern would scrape the *Mona* as they passed. Ignoring the bullets, John stood up and gave the wheel another half-point to port. The steamer was nearly half-way past now and he had the greatest difficulty in preventing himself from screaming. His blood was racing with excitement when Todd's voice rang out: "Hard a' star-board!" His brain was past thinking of the reason for the order, but he twirled the spokes automatically.

John had had no time to peer down on his own deck to see what was happening and the activities of the sniper had also hindered the design, but now in the culminating excitement he felt he must look. The machine-gun had stopped—maybe a jam, maybe lack of ammunition—it didn't matter much, but he knew in his tired brain that it was a relief. The Captain's last order had swung the *Mona's*

bows towards the schooner so that the two vessels were now tending to lie parallel to each other. They were dangerously close, and John straightened up the rudder as they rushed past each other at twenty knots.

Now for the first time he heard his own crew in action. The crackling of rifle fire ran along the *Mona's* starboard bulwarks, and the cries of the wounded as the bullets found their targets followed the orange spurts. It only lasted a few seconds and then they were clear. The steamer had poured in a deadly fire as she passed down the schooner's side—"Stop both! Port helm!"—The lagoon was too small to permit careering at high speed, and the danger was past. Wiping the sweat from his face and eyes, John turned aft and searched for the schooner. She was aground and by the tilt of her stern it looked as though it might take hours to refloat her.

With night glasses focused on the enemy he suddenly experienced a wave of relief that his responsibility was finished, and he felt as limp as though he had run a race. Gripping the bridge rail with both hands, he realised that his legs would let him down at any moment.

"Well done, John!" boomed Todd's voice in his ear.

"If you knew how scared I was with the bridge in your hands—phew!—I daren't leave the deck, John. Smith had pocketed all the keys and we seemed to take hours to open the magazine. How-

ever, thanks to you, he's ashore and more than likely has damaged his screw."

John's wits were returning as the Captain talked and his knees felt stronger.

"Your turn to port was wonderfully well judged. If you'd gone the other way he'd have had you!"

"But—I—er——" John was confused at the praise.

"By turning to port you made him go astern, and a single-screw vessel is never too handy under those conditions."

CHAPTER VII

THE LOST PROPELLER

MORNING showed the schooner lying in the same position, and Captain Todd suggested that they had left matters until daylight to make a thorough inspection. Price, who had not played a prominent part the previous night, had now regained his confidence and was very much in evidence. Breakfast was over and Anson had charge of the ship.

"The thing to do now is to finish them off."

"Just how?" asked Todd, looking up at Price's remark.

"Same way as you suggested before. You can drive them below, board her, and then—er—get rid of them."

John wondered how the idea would be received. It sounded rather cold-blooded to him.

"Yes, I could do that," agreed Todd, speaking slowly and quietly. "That is what Smith would do if the positions were reversed. The only difference is that I'm not Smith. It smacks rather too much of cornered rats, and my idea from the first has been to drive him off, not butcher him."

"Ay, I could be no party to anything as mur-

derous as that." Mr. Fraser wiped his mouth and left the saloon. John grinned as he remembered the engineer's attack on the guard with his iron bar.

Price ignored the remark. "Squeamish, Todd?"

"The main difference between Smith and myself is a degree of roguery. We're both rogues, but I am respected in every port as a man of my word and Smith isn't. You may find it difficult to understand, but I've never murdered a man."

Price blinked at the menacing tones and withdrew his airy manner.

"Then, what do you propose?"

"I think we'll send a flag of truce and hear what they have to say. We're in a difficulty ourselves, since the diving suit which served an excellent purpose last night is now ruined for diving. A machine-gun burst riddled it."

John tried to look sympathetic, but somehow a feeling of relief persisted.

"The important point is whether they have diving gear," went on Todd. "I must find that out first, then lay our plans accordingly. If they have gear it alters the whole position; but if not, then we can safely return to Panama and replace our own."

"You would leave them here alone?" queried Price.

"What does that matter? They can't dive, so where's the worry?"

Plumley took the skipper in the launch with a

flag of truce, leaving John in charge of the ship, while Anson supervised repairs to their damage.

The launch dropped down to within hailing distance of the schooner. There was some interchange of shouts which John was unable to hear, and then Smith put off in a boat. It was an odd sight with the two captains talking to each other in the middle of the lagoon, neither trusting himself to put foot on the other's vessel.

John leaned against the bridge casing, watching the boats, and glanced round, to see that the engineer was coming up the ladder.

"Well, laddie, and how is the ear this morning?" He pointed to a piece of plaster which decorated the tip of John's ear.

"It's only a scratch, Chief; nothing more."

"Ay, you were very lucky, but your lack of inches no doubt helped. Now, if the Captain had been in his rightful place he'd probably be full of lead this morning."

"It's difficult to believe, Chief."

"Maybe you're right, laddie. I've known him for a good many years and he's still alive. He's no right to be, but the fact remains. You get on very well with him?"

"I've never met a man I liked more. There's something about him——"

"Ay, there's something solid there apart from his size, and he's big in many ways. Will he be long?" Fraser pointed to the boats with his pipe.

"I hardly know, Chief."

"Ah, I want to see him about the port engine. It needs some attention."

"Serious?" John cocked an eyebrow.

"Laddie, the trouble is the engine-room staff. I'm called the chief, but I'm the only one since the rest are no more than greasers. It's cheap that way, ye understand, but in the long run it proves expensive."

"But I thought there were rules and regulations——?"

"We're not under the British flag, so Board of Trade rules don't run in this ship. Oh, no!"

"Here he comes! The meeting is over." They watched the launch tie up and the skipper come aboard.

"Good morning, Mr. Fraser, and what's the trouble?"

"Good morning, sir, although we've already said that at breakfast. There's no trouble, but I'm thinking that yon port engine should be taken down."

Todd was not impressed and showed it. "Will it work?" he asked.

"Oh, ay, it will work until it breaks down."

"That's all we can expect from any machinery, Mr. Fraser. I shall need main steam in an hour."

The Chief put his pipe in his pocket, looked sorrowfully at John, then went below. Captain Todd glared at his departing back, then turned to his junior officer.

"Smith has no diving gear, so we're both in the

same boat. It wasn't difficult to find that out since he had no suspicion, and when we leave he'll be frantic with guessing why."

"Why, sir?"

"Because he's no idea that our diving suit is ruined."

"I see, and how long will he take to refloat?"

"I can't say, and it doesn't matter very much since we can travel two knots to his one. That is, unless he picks up a very favourable slant of wind." John looked round and noticed that the light breeze was from the south-east. "With luck," continued Todd, "we should be back here before he's reached the mainland. Now then, get busy and hoist in the boats and tell Mr. Anson to attend to the anchors. I'm going below to see Price."

For the next two hours John was kept too busy to allow his mind to run on future events. With the *Mona* so short of officers, Captain Todd was making full use of him, but even Todd was forced to draw the line at watch officer. In the event of something going wrong no court of inquiry would accept an uncertificated officer as a responsible person. Therefore, Anson and the Skipper had to take watch and watch, but during the latter's turn of duty John was kept on the bridge as supernumerary.

By sundown the wind had veered into the west and the *Mona* ran before high, following seas. Unaccountably, the waves had kicked up before the strength of the wind warranted and John guessed

that the reason lay in the junction of conflicting currents. Before dark the Captain had made a tour of the ship, assuring himself that everything possible had been secured against the likelihood of a stiff blow. Unfortunately, the wind was not steady but swung about through ten or more degrees and from time to time reached gale force. Clad in oilskins, John stood next to the Captain by the wheel, watching their bows climbing, then dropping, as the great rollers came by.

Suddenly the wind died away as though somebody had turned off a fan. A moment later a strong puff was felt and then followed a tremendous gust of wind. The Quartermaster had a most difficult task since the vagaries of the wind were unpredictable, and the steamer inclined to yaw at the least opportunity. The spray was driving over the bridge and occasionally the edge of a roller smothered a bulwark, then rushed the length of the deck like a cataract. The sea had risen considerably since their watch had begun, and the Skipper gave some anxious looks over the stern. The great danger with a following sea is, that of pooping. A vessel which drops into a valley or trough must climb up before the succeeding wave overtakes her. The rollers were now reaching such a height that there was a danger of one of them crashing on their counter.

John shook the spray from his face, then gripped the rail as the *Mona* stood on her propellers. Up, up, she rose from the trough, canted level,

then dived on her nose with screws racing. He risked a glance over his shoulder, then felt the Captain's grip on his elbow.

"Keep your eyes forward. There's no danger astern, provided the engines hang on." Todd knew the sensations consequent on looking at mountains of water rushing relentlessly at a ship. He picked up the telephone.

"Give me another ten revolutions.—What? Yes, I know all about that. Don't argue!" Growling and muttering, he hunched his shoulders against the spray and continued the endless peering at the wild sea. At the summit of each wave the wind howled and shrieked like a thousand devils, but down in the troughs the noise was blanketed.

"Keep her head on!" roared the Skipper as the *Mona* gave a wriggling twist as though to escape her rudder. Suddenly the telephone tinkled, a weak, shrill noise which was blown away almost as it sounded. Todd clamped the earpiece under his sou'-wester and listened, then replaced the instrument with a grunt.

"Go below and find out what the Chief wants," he ordered.

There was no difficulty in carrying out the command since a ladder led down from the chart-house to a compartment which shut off the engine-room by a waterproof bulkhead. Carefully fastening the bulkhead door behind him, John opened the second door, which acted as an air lock to the boiler-room. Although he could see the flaming

oil in the furnace mouths, the air coming up through the floor gratings was cold. The forced draught to the boilers cooled the air and the stoker was wearing a coat. Giving the man a nod, he passed through into the engine-room, and Mr. Fraser walked across, holding carefully to a brass rail as the *Mona* stood on her head. Dressed in singlet and cotton trousers, with a sweat rag round his neck, the Chief presented a very different appearance from the immaculate uniform he wore on deck.

"Tell the Captain I must shut down the port engine. That accursed telephone is useless—unless he didn't want to hear me."

"What's the trouble, sir?"

"It would take all night to tell you. If I don't shut down in a few minutes, the darned thing will stop of its own accord!"

"Can you repair it?" John had no desire to argue the point, but he knew the Captain would inquire.

"Not under these conditions." Both gripped the rail as the engine-room slanted down at an alarming angle.

"Can you give us the same speed on the star-board engine?" The sweat trickled down the boy's nose as he stared into the other's eyes.

"Maybe, maybe not. If I give her full pressure she'll most likely throw off the automatic governor. If that happens——?"

John could finish the sentence himself. If the

governors went, every time the ship lifted her propeller clear of the water it would race like a mad thing. There was no point in discussing possibilities and John made his way on deck again.

The Captain listened to the report without interruption. It was difficult to read his expression in the dim light, still more so to guess his train of thought. John watched the telegraph pointers as the Captain's hand dropped clear. The starboard engine showed "full ahead" and the port engine "stop".

Apparently, they were to carry on at their best speed, risking the engineer's warning, and, looking round at the raging seas, he could see little else that could be done. Stepping inside the chart-house, he pulled the sliding door shut and set to making some cocoa on the electric stove. A few minutes later he battled his way back to the bridge, clasping a mug of steaming liquid. The Captain had taken the wheel from the Quartermaster and waved John away. The bell to change the watch had already rung, but the wind had smothered the sound.

As it occurred to him that Anson was late, the Mate arrived on the bridge and listened while John shouted the present position.

Off duty, he went below to snatch an hour or so of rest. With portholes screwed tight the saloon was stuffy and he stripped off his oilskin and muffler before he realised that Price was lying stretched out on a cushioned bench.

"Hullo, youngster? Had enough up there?"

"Yes, it's pretty grim. Thought you'd be in bed."

"Bed? no, I can't sleep under these conditions. It takes a sailor to do that."

The steward entered with a bowl of soup which was as much as anybody could expect under storm conditions.

"I've been thinking, youngster, that it's a good thing Captain Todd got that load of gold aboard." The tone was pleasant and evidently Price wanted to talk.

"Yes, it was fortunate, sir." John was not sure where the conversation was heading.

"I bet you stowed it away in a pretty safe spot, eh?"

"I expect he did, sir."

Price laughed. "Tight-mouthed, eh? Well, it's the Skipper's share, as I've already agreed, so there's no need for secrecy now. I guess he put them well away down in the hold."

The words came with a chuckle but were framed almost as a question. The ship lurched and John grabbed at the anchored table.

"I can truthfully say I've no idea," replied John. "Quite likely they are down in the hold."

"Look here, Mayne, we're all in this business together and there's no sense in having secrets from each other. We should all pull together."

John yawned. "I daresay you're right. You should have a word with the Captain."

"You know, Mayne, you would do a lot better for yourself to keep friends with me. I may not count for much on this bucketing old tub, but I'm something to be reckoned with ashore." Price sat up and jammed himself into a corner of his couch.

"I've no wish to be anything but friends, but I take my orders from Captain Todd. If you want to know where the gold is you must ask him."

The customary sneer returned to Price's face. "You upstart foundling!" he snarled.

It was not John's place to quarrel with the man, so he decided to turn in for an hour. Suddenly the table commenced vibrating under his hands, then the deck of the saloon seemed to dance. A shudder ran through the ship, then as suddenly faded away. Her bows pitched down as usual, but, instead of completing the switchback motion, the ship gave a sickening roll until her bulwarks must have been submerged.

John knew in a moment what had happened. The starboard engine had stopped and the bows had fallen off into a trough. With steerage-way gone she would roll as helplessly as a cork. A few degrees too far and the roll would be her last. While the thoughts were flying through his head his feet were rushing him up on deck, and there a scene of madness met his eyes. The searchlight was blazing as it swung its beam on Anson and a party trying to launch a sea anchor which might hold the yacht to the wind. Oil drums had been

fixed up in the bows and their contents were dripping in the attempt to smother the breaking seas.

"Propeller gone!" roared the Captain. "Get below and find out the position. Tell the Chief he must risk the other engine. Don't stand gaping! Jump to it!"

John jumped to it, but literally speaking, progress was slow since two hands were necessary to counteract the violent rolling. Down in the engine-room Mr. Fraser, with one arm crooked round a feed pipe, bellowed taunts and oaths at his scared gang. They were anxious to escape from the heaving, jumping mass of machinery. The air was saturated with the fumes of fuel oil and hot metal.

"Captain wants the port engine, sir."

"Ay, I know that, laddie, and I'm working on it now. I can't promise much power, but he shall have a few revolutions. Tell him to expect steam in five minutes, but for how long I won't guarantee." His eyes were blood-shot and his jaw tense. If anything could be done, Fraser would do it.

"Can I help, sir?"

"No. I'll lay one of these heathen out and then the others may come to their senses." The Chief was a man of action. A pipe wrench flew across the room and tore away a strip of skin from a greaser's forehead. The man staggered, slipped, then fell on the oily grating, and then, as though by magic,

the rest of the staff stopped gibbering and listened to their orders.

John turned away to report to the Skipper. Not having stopped to don his oilskins, he was already drenched with spray and the wind cut through his clothing like a knife. The oil floating down from the bows had already quietened the seas in the immediate vicinity, but the ghastly rolling still continued. Suddenly the bridge 'phone rang and Todd sprang to the wheel. Slowly, painfully slowly, the *Mona* answered the helm. Even the reduced power which the engine-room could provide was sufficient to draw the vessel's head from the trough of the waves, and she gradually took up a position with her bows to the wind.

The relief was immense. Still violently pitching, she no longer rolled. The immediate danger was past and now it rested with the staying power of the remaining engine and Fraser's skill. There was little more that could be done during the last few hours of darkness. The Captain remained at the wheel, fighting to keep the *Mona's* head to the seas, while Anson and John struggled in the glare of the searchlight to secure various objects which had worked loose during the earlier part of the night.

With the first light of morning it was seen that the storm had passed over. The seas were still running high, but the wind had moderated to a stiff breeze. The port engine was still holding out and everybody realised their escape from founde-

ing had been miraculous. By noon the sorely tried port engine was rung off and the *Mona* was allowed to toss about like a derelict. The seas had dropped to nothing more than a heavy swell, and now commenced the heart-breaking task of putting things to rights.

Fraser was all for buckling to while the good weather held, but the Captain had other views. The Chief was the only man on board with the necessary skill to repair the engines, but he was almost asleep on his feet as he stood. His arguments were brushed aside and he was ordered to bed for a few hours. Everybody was in much the same state, but certain things could and must be done. Some sort of sail might be raised, and John and Anson were detailed to improvise what they could. It was a sorry-looking affair when it was finally hauled up, but it gave steerage-way, which was the most that could be expected.

When John's turn came for a few hours below he slept like the proverbial log. The sounds of banging which rang through the ship had no effect on his slumbers, and it was not until Anson had given him a hard shake that he returned to consciousness. The Skipper was parading up and down the maindeck when he appeared and seemed to be short-tempered.

"The Chief is fitting a spare screw and expects to be finished by dark," the Captain reported.

"That's grand, sir!"

Todd scowled. "Bah! It reduces our speed to

about six or seven knots, and it's more than likely that Smith will beat us in to Panama."

"Price was trying to pump me regarding the gold you stowed away," John broke in, "and I thought you should know."

"Ah, that man needs watching. I told you that before. If he wants to talk, let him, but don't give anything away."

"I don't know anything, sir, so I can't tell him."

"Of course you don't," chuckled the Captain, "and that's why I said let him talk." The exchange seemed to have amused him and improved his temper. "You'd better report to the Chief and see if you can be of any assistance."

John touched his cap and made his way below, to find Mr. Fraser haranguing his staff. It appeared to be some sort of lecture given in a mixture of Spanish, English, and Indian, but although John could make no sense of it, the men appeared to follow without difficulty.

"Scram, you heathen! And what do you want, laddie?"

"Captain thought I might be some help, sir."

"Hm, hm! From any other deck officer I should take that as a terrible insult, but in view of your extreme youth I'll find you something to do." He pointed to a mass of machinery lying in pieces. "You see that? I want every piece cleaned until it shines like a mirror. You'll find that some of the grease will need a lot of moving, but get it off.

Get it off! If you can't rub it off, lick it off. Don't stand gaping at it! Get it off!"

The work was suitable for the humblest recruit to the engine-room, and John realised that he was it.

Twenty-four hours had passed and the *Mona* was still limping along on one engine. Mr. Fraser now had his way with the long-neglected port engine which bestrewed the benches of his department. He promised that by the time the vessel was ready to make the return trip all would be well. The wind, ever since the night of the storm, had been from a favourable quarter and everybody pictured the schooner flying before the breeze with every sail set.

Price toyed with the stem of his glass in the saloon that evening and gazed from John to the Captain.

"We've got to face facts, Skipper. That devil, Smith, will be in Panama long before us."

"Yes, I admit it." Todd was glum.

"There's also the possibility that the schooner will beat us back to the island," went on Price.

"H'm! Very doubtful. Very unlikely."

"So you say, Todd, but things can happen. Who, for example, would have thought of losing a screw?"

"What are you driving at, Price?"

"I'm suggesting that if I were in Smith's shoes I should make things as awkward as possible for us."

The Captain nodded his head in agreement.

"But I don't see exactly what he can do. For instance, he may guess that we're bound for Panama, but he doesn't know we've lost our diving suit."

"In other words, Captain, you just think I'm barking up a tree?"

"No, no. I think there's something in what you say, but it's too vague. It doesn't help us."

Price drew out pencil and paper from his pocket and slowly wrote. John picked up a book and yawned.

"I want that radio sent." The man's tone was peremptory.

"What's this, Price, code?"

"Yes, to a pal of mine. It's a little matter that I just remembered. Will you send it off now?"

The Captain motioned to John and they both went up to the radio cuddy.

"There's something fishy here," remarked Todd. "Why should he want to send out messages in code following our conversation?"

John switched on the dynamo and read the message, but it conveyed nothing to him beyond a name and address.

"Fishy, sir? I think you're right. Shall I send it?"

He could see that Todd was tempted not to do so.

"Just a moment. I can't get the hang of things. What's happened recently that needs a code message to Panama? This comes of working for a

man you don't trust. D'you know, I suspect his most innocent words of having a double meaning." The two looked at each other in the tiny office and both were puzzled.

"Oh, confound the thing! Send it! I know I'm doing the wrong thing, but I can't think of a suitable excuse for holding it up."

John stretched his hand to a switch, hesitated, pressed it across, then commenced to tap the transmitting key. Todd waited a few moments, then left the office, still frowning at his thoughts.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BACK STREETS OF PANAMA

THE *Mona* came up to her position off Panama, as indicated by the pilot, and dropped anchor. John was forward, supervising the operation, and as the chain ran clear he signalled to Anson on the bridge. The port medical officer was already aboard and engaged with the Captain on the maindeck. Passing close by on his way to the bridge, John heard them arguing, or, at least, the Captain was using a sharp tone. The pilot waved a good-bye to Anson and left the bridge as John climbed up, followed by Todd.

"That scoundrel Smith has started his games already."

The Skipper flung his cap on the chart table and mopped his face. Both officers waited for the next words.

"The double-dyed crook! He's reported us to the medical officer as having buried a yellow fever case!"

"But how? I mean----- Anson was bewildered.

"Oh, it doesn't matter how and why and where. Don't you see his game? I can straighten things out in a couple of days, and then Smith will be gone. It's time he's gaining, and until I can con-

vince the M.O.H. that a mistake has been made we're all in quarantine. If I could lay my hands on Smith at this moment——"

The Chief Engineer arrived at the critical moment, clad in immaculate white ducks.

"I have to report, sir, that the engine-room is now in first-class order, and, let me tell you——"

The Captain turned on him like a lion springing at a deer.

"And—let—me—tell—you, Mr. Fraser, that this ship is in quarantine! If you had been half an engineer and kept us running we should have beaten Smith and his pack of lies. Quarantine! Ye gods!" Todd stamped off the bridge to his cabin.

"The trouble with yon man is that he becomes too excited. Half an engineer! Hm! It's a simple enough matter to obtain *pratique*, since Doctor Mackenzie happens to be a friend of mine. I'm thinking that a few minutes' conversation will accomplish more than hours of argument. Laddie, if you'll signal a boat alongside I'll drop him a line. Half an engineer, eh?"

John and Anson had listened to the speakers in amazement. The idea of quarantine had not fully sunk in yet.

"What exactly happens, Mr. Anson?"

"We shall be isolated in a separate berth, with no shore leave and no visitors."

"For how long?"

"Don't know. It depends on the medical bloke.

They are pretty hot in this place on infectious diseases. I suppose we shall be examined and dosed and inoculated and generally messed around."

The Chief's scheme was nipped in the bud before he could even write the letter. A guard-boat came within hail and ordered them to a new anchorage away from all other shipping. Cursing and mouth-ing oaths, the Captain followed the pilot's directions from his boat and finally they dropped anchor fifty yards from a deserted mole.

"Well," said Todd as they sat in conclave round the saloon table, "if anybody can suggest something, let's hear it." The glare in his eyes suggested that the company should not take him too literally.

"It will be dark in an hour," said Price. "I have arranged delivery of two diving suits by radio and the men that are bringing them won't be bothered with any twaddle such as quarantine. We will take them aboard and then you can quietly slip out. By morning we shall be well away from pursuit." He smiled and spread his hands.

"These men are coming aboard with you?" asked Todd.

"Yes, and believe me, they are not school-girls. Their price is high, but they will be worth it to me in the end." He glanced at his wrist-watch as though impatient for their arrival.

Todd looked the reverse of pleased at the idea

of Price being reinforced with a gang. It might be distinctly awkward, but he replied to gain time for his thoughts,

"I follow the idea, Price, and seeing that we haven't been served with the official quarantine order, I might risk slipping out on the tide. Let's see, that serves until eleven—if we're not clear by then, we're here for the night."

"Don't worry. I'm well served. My men will be here by eight or nine at the latest."

Fraser crossed his legs and looked important.

"It may not have occurred to you, Mr. Price," he said, "that a steamer requires such things as oil fuel. If your—er—schoolgirls can fix that by eleven, all right."

Having delivered his bombshell he uncrossed his legs. A faint smile crept over Todd's face, but Price sat speechless.

"How much have you left, Chief?" asked the Captain.

"I can't say to a ton, and there's no dangerous shortage, but I don't reckon I've more than two hundred miles." The Skipper cocked an eyebrow.

"That puts paid to leave to-night. Sorry, Mr. Price, but these things happen."

The man addressed opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, and left the saloon. John glanced at Anson, who had quietly fallen asleep.

"Quarantine, fuel oil, and diving gear." Todd ticked off the items on his fingers. "In order of

importance those are the things that are holding us. It looks to me that Smith holds all the cards."

"I can fix the quarantine," said Fraser. "If I slip ashore as soon as it's dark I can be with Mackenzie in twenty minutes."

"Will he accept your word?"

"He will." The tone left no doubt that the matter was as good as settled. Apparently, the Chief and the doctor were very good friends.

"Good enough, Chief. That brings us to oil."

"Ay, and if you're willing to pay double price for it, Paddy M'Ginty will send a float alongside at dawn."

The Skipper stroked his chin. He knew quite well that he would pay the price demanded, but he preferred to give the impression of considering the matter. Finally, he nodded.

"All right, Chief. That brings us to the diving gear, and I don't mind admitting that I'm not keen on this gang of Price's. The trouble is that I can't keep 'em off in view of the charter."

John moistened his lips. "They won't be coming, sir."

Todd looked at the junior as though he were demented.

"*What?*" he exclaimed.

"You see, when you gave me the radio to send, sir, I took a fearful liberty. You didn't seem at all sure, yourself, and I—just——" Fraser chuckled openly.

"You young rip!" began the Captain, but the chuckle proved infectious. "I should be very angry about that. Your job is to take orders; however, as things are—hm!"

"And so, laddie, the message never went?"

"I'm afraid not, Chief." The two men now laughed so loud that Anson moved as though waking. John saw that the squall had passed, but it had been a narrow squeak.

"In that case, Paddy had better supply us with diving gear as well as oil. I'll give you a note to him, Chief, and a cheque."

John realised that Paddy M'Ginty was the sort of business man who could supply anything required at a price and no questions asked.

An hour later a boat was quietly dropped from the davits and John and Fraser slid down on a rope. Price, on deck with the Captain, was already fuming with impatience at the non-arrival of the assistance he had summoned. The boat pushed off and was carried up the roadstead on the flowing tide to a landing-stage well known to Fraser.

Mooring the boat to a ring, they made off towards a row of lights. The place was a sea of darkness to John, but Fraser seemed to know his way around the waterfront blindfolded. They passed a café and the lighted window of a shop, then hurried up a wide street. Turning sharply up a narrow side lane, Fraser stopped and gave John his directions for finding M'Ginty. The arrangement made

was for Fraser to visit the medical officer while John delivered the Captain's note.

He hurried on alone, wondering what reception would be accorded him on arrival. There were few people about the narrow streets and none paid him any attention. Entering the mouth of a twisting lane, he glanced at the weather-beaten board to make sure the name of the street agreed with Fraser's directions, then looked ahead for the illuminated sign of a ship's anchor. The Chief had impressed on him the ease with which M'Ginty's house could be found, and there sure enough was the painted sign-board.

He paused, took a couple of steps, then drew back to the deeper shadow of the wall. A man, dressed in some type of uniform, lounged against the wall facing M'Ginty's house. There was nothing alarming in the fact, and there was probably a harmless enough reason for his presence, but for John the effect gave rise to a prickly feeling.

For a long time he stood with his eyes on the stranger, then his conscience jogged him and he remembered that his trust and duty demanded some action. There was nothing for it but to ignore the man. Hunching his shoulders to make himself as insignificant as possible, he slouched forward. His feet stopped opposite the door and, in spite of his determination not to do so, his head turned and looked at the stranger. It was a policeman.

"Where are you from, shaver?" The voice was guttural.

"I'm from the waterfront." John promptly shot back his answer.

"Waterfront? What part?" The question was awkward and probably was the forerunner of more.

"I help the dockers and lightermen. I'm a runner."

"Are you? And who sent you?"

The question and answer game might have continued for some time, but as the policeman spoke he moved from his wall towards the other side of the lane. John panicked and fled. The man flashed after him and he heard the pattering feet on the hard-baked road. Frantically he searched for a turning, preferably dark as Hades, but the lane twisted on and on. The feet pattered louder and nearer. He imagined the outstretched arm a few inches from his shoulder, then suddenly he slowed up for two paces and stooped down like a ball. The policeman took a flying header over John's back and rolled. Long before he could collect himself, the boy had retraced his steps at top speed. Not daring to waste time by knocking, he quietly pushed open the door of McGinty's shop then closed it behind him.

Panting for breath, he waited for the policeman to follow, but although he strained his ears he heard nothing. The house was silent, dark, and stuffy. With one hand scraping along the wall, he

edged down the passage further into the house. A voice sounded and he pushed his ear to the thin wooden panel.

"You must admit, lootenant, that a visit from an American naval officer at this hour of the night is unusual."

"If you like, M'Ginty. Does the time matter? I'm not in uniform and I frankly admit I can't get the informætion through the ordinary channels. We know that some of your business is—er—shall we say, not for publication. I don't want to interfere—officially, I know nothing about it."

"Ah, and you will continue to know nothing, provided I agree to help you, eh? That is the price?"

"Yes, speaking as one man to another. I'll play fair with you. If I receive orders from Washington to take notice of your particular business that's another matter. Until then, do as you like."

There was a long silence and John visualised the two men summing each other up.

"All right, lootenant. What do you want to know?"

"Somewhere off this coast is a Jap steamer sunk with a cargo of gold in the hold. Uncle Sam lays claim to it, pending the settlement of the war questions. Washington has news that somebody has wind of the affair and is attempting a clean up."

"Well?"

"Well, M'Ginty, I want to know the location of

the wreck or the name of the outfit that's after it."

"I see. If that information came my way, and I passed it on to you, I should be found floating in the harbour shortly afterwards. It's dangerous to know too much about some things."

"True enough, but you live a dangerous sort of life. Suppose, for example, that the authorities got to know that you handled a bit of gun-running now and again? I'm not suggesting that you do, of course, but it might be awkward for you, don't you think? It might work out at about seven years in the penitentiary. Look, M'Ginty, the information I'm after can be slid across quietly and nobody any the wiser. I shan't talk."

Again there was a long pause and John eased his position by the panel.

"I'll do what I can for you. The information may not come my way—who knows? If I stumble across something which I can pass on without slitting my own throat, I will."

John caught the sound of a chair-leg scraping and feared that the naval officer might be leaving. He tiptoed further from the door and squeezed against a large box which he felt with his outstretched hands. Watching in the shadows, he saw the shaft of light as the door opened and the two speakers entered the passage. A few seconds later the front door opened, then closed. The officer had gone and M'Ginty was returning to his room.

John was about to sigh with relief when the beam from a flashlamp blinded his eyes.

"Stick your hands up and walk this way!"

There was no time to consider ways and means. The order had been curtly given and had a ring of meaning.

"That's right. Keep on this way and through the door. Sit down and put your arms on the table." The speaker now came into sight for the first time. M'Ginty took the chair opposite and John regarded one of the fattest men he had ever seen. Captain Todd was a giant, but nobody would ever suggest that he was fat; M'Ginty was a barrel of a man.

"I think, boy, I have seen you somewhere before. Explain what you're doing in my house."

Vastly relieved at the opportunity of doing so, John poured out the story of the *Mona's* quarantine, the need of oil, and the matter of diving gear. M'Ginty listened with attention and his tiny eyes glinted momentarily at the mention of the last item.

"But why were you skulking at the foot of the stairs when I found you just now?"

"I had knocked at the door, then found it was open; and then—there was the light—and——"

The barrel of flesh shifted in the chair.

"How long have you been with Captain Todd?"

"Only one voyage."

"Only one? And that was from Panama to——?"

John's eyes dropped to the table and for the life of him he could think of no safe reply. M'Ginty might know the truth.

"Never mind, boy. You're not quick enough to tell lies, it seems. So Fraser is coming here after seeing Mackenzie?"

"Yes, and I am to wait for him." John fished out the letter from Todd and pushed it across the table. The electric light glared on dead-white walls and ceiling; a mosquito buzzed annoyingly around. If only the Captain had told him whether M'Ginty was to be taken into their confidence. Even now he realised that he might already have compromised the expedition.

The little pig eyes closed and the voice spoke again: "Fraser will fix the quarantine and the oil will be attended to. I'm not sure about the diving gear."

"That's very important, Mr. M'Ginty."

"The *Mona* is under charter—what's the name of the man?"

For all the slug-like appearance of the figure before him, John began to feel that the man was to be trusted. After all, Todd was unlikely to have dealings with M'Ginty unless that were so.

"His name is Price."

"The name is unknown to me. Describe him."

John complied as well as he was able until the other lifted a hand to stop him.

"All right, boy, I know him now. So Price needs diving gear? I understand."

John felt that he had been turned inside out. The man's questions had been so unconnected and unexpected that lying would have been dangerous. He had jumped from one subject to another until John was confused.

"Have you anything more to tell me?"

"I think I've already said far more than I should. Captain Todd doesn't encourage talkativeness."

M'Ginty's eyes disappeared into rolls of fat as his face creased in a smile.

"Yes, yes, perhaps you're a wise young man. Don't worry, your information is safe enough with me."

He pressed a bell on the table and gave an order to the servant.

"I have to leave you for a while to attend some business. Would you care to wait here for Fraser, or would you prefer me to drop you near the ship?"

"I think I should wait here, as I arranged. You don't object?"

"No, no. I may return before Fraser and you have gone, but it doesn't matter." M'Ginty crushed a floppy straw hat on his head and left the room. The soft-footed servant padded in with a bowl of crushed fruit floating in ice and gestured to John to make himself comfortable.

In the saloon of the *Mona* a disgruntled and impatient Price was fuming at the non-appearance

of his henchmen. Todd was aware of the reason, but had no intention of telling the other.

"Maybe they never received the radio?" he suggested.

"Why assume that?" snapped Price.

"I'm not assuming anything—simply a suggestion."

"That half-grown kid more likely muffed the message! Ye gods! Fancy relying on somebody like that!"

"I don't see what his age has to do with it. I stood over the lad while he started on the transmission. Anyway, if they don't turn up you can go ashore when Fraser gives us the O.K. It won't be much of a delay, especially since we have to wait for oil fuel."

Price listened to the reasonable suggestion, but was in no mood to appreciate it.

"I don't want to go ashore. I'd prefer—oh, why should I explain to you? It's not your business."

Todd waggled the cigar in his mouth thoughtfully.

"Well, it's past midnight now. Do you fancy, they still might turn up?"

"No, I don't," came the emphatic answer. "Something has gone wrong—that's obvious. The cheap bunch of rats! They're frightened of their own shadows, I'll be bound."

A seaman clattered down the companion and handed the Captain a letter. Price edged as near as he dared to the reader.

"That's fine! Quarantine's lifted and Fraser has gone on to Paddy's. Now we can start moving." The cigar stub was flung in the fireplace. "Are you coming with me?"

"Hanged if I know—they may still come."

"Just as you like." The Skipper picked up his cap.

"Half a mo'. Are you going to M'Ginty?"

"I am."

"Then, I'll come part of the way with you—walking around these parts in the dark isn't too healthy."

"That depends on your reputation and the company you keep. The difference between us, as I told you once before, is that I'm respected in any port."

Price glowered at the implication and followed Todd into the boat.

Half way to their destination Price branched off down a side street, leaving Todd to continue alone. Admitted by the Indian servant, the Captain entered the white-painted office and saw John asleep in a chair. Dozing lightly, he stirred; then, at the first touch, sprang up and explained the existing position.

"I'm afraid, sir, you'll think I've been something of a garrulous old woman. But his questions were so off-hand and yet at the same time I had to answer."

"That's all right, you've done no harm. M'Ginty is trustworthy and straight in his dealings. Where the blazes has that engineer got to?"

"He arranged to meet me here."

"Oh, yes, he would; but the trouble is that when he gets ashore he loses all count of time. Ah, well, I think I know where we shall find him."

At the sign of the "Blue Moon," an all-night café, which they entered a few minutes later, John found some difficulty in seeing. The air, or what was left of it, swirled in clouds from the action of an electric fan. There appeared to be no outlet, so the smoke eddied and drifted round the room. An automatic gramophone, or juke-box, crooned away and the buzz of talk half-drowned it. A white-clad negro swept some crumbs from the table at which they sat and then shuffled off to obtain some coffee. Gradually becoming accustomed to the atmosphere, John gazed round the room at the occupants of the various tables.

"Don't stare; they don't like it. Just keep your eyes moving."

"Who—I mean, what do all these people do here?"

Todd scratched his head thoughtfully. "Do? I don't suppose most of them do anything." This place is a sort of hotel with no bedrooms. So long as you buy something now and again you can stay here as long as you like. Look! Take it easy and just glance naturally at the table beyond the fellow in the yellow shirt."

"Mr. Fraser?"

"That's him, John."

Fraser was lounging behind a square bottle,

listening to two strangers. The juke-box stopped, then started again on a different tune. A voice suddenly raised itself in anger somewhere in the room, then as suddenly died away. Nobody took any notice until a crash of glass sounded above the other din; then, glancing towards Fraser's table again, John saw the whole thing overturn.

"That's done it!" Todd laid a hand on John's arm. "Keep near me, whatever happens, and watch out for knives!"

As John rammed his cap firmly in place, following his Chief's example, a transformation took place. The incident at Fraser's table had no connection with anybody else, but, as though a signal had been given, the room resounded with shouts and yells. A knife whizzed past John's head and clattered against the wall. A plate shattered itself as it landed against a pillar. Todd lurched forward towards Fraser's table and brushed a man off his feet as though he were a skittle.

Remembering his warning, John kept close behind and ducked beneath a glass, which careered across the room out of the smoke. Fraser was swaying on his feet while wielding a poker, and the men trying to grapple were chary of approaching the deadly flail. One of the assailants fell back with a curse, rubbing an arm, then drew a knife. John saw the blade flash as Fraser turned his back to the danger. Realising that a warning shout would be useless, he grabbed at his cap and flung it at the man's face.

The throng which milled senselessly around got in each other's way, so that escape became most difficult and led to further fights. Knives, bottles, fists, and finger-nails were in use and the yells and shouts rose and fell. Todd picked up a small man, held him aloft for a moment, then dashed his body into the middle of a straining, struggling quartet which blocked their approach to Fraser. An arm was stretched forward as though to claw at the Captain's face, but the next moment the wretch was yelling as it was twisted through a full circle. Todd had now driven close alongside Fraser and the three of them stood panting for breath. Pandemonium still raged and now, added to the other sounds, came the sharp crack of a revolver.

"Come on, we must get out of this! No, not that way! Make for the back entrance through the kitchen!"

Todd pushed John between himself and Fraser and together they drove like a cyclone towards the back of the room. John used the broken leg of a chair, Fraser his murderous club, and Todd demolished or swept aside anything human which dared to stand in his path. A regular outburst of revolver fire crackled forth; then came a lull in the thunderous noise as though everybody had stopped yelling; after which the note changed to one of fear. From all sides went up the shout: "The cops! The cops!"

A wooden door which prevented their exit was bodily wrenched from its hinges as Todd drove his

back into it and swept Fraser and John through with a sweep of his arm. Two revolver shots sang past and plugged themselves in the plaster, and all three ducked, then ran through the passage. The farther door was open and gave on to a small courtyard. A dog yapped from somewhere close by, and as John raised his eyes to the far side of the court he saw two shadows.

In the excitement of the moment, without pausing to think, he ran forward, then heard the gasp of air as though a tyre had suddenly deflated. The shadows separated, one dropped, and the other drove a fist into his stomach.

CHAPTER IX

CHECK TO THE *MONA*

AT a quarter past four the same morning, M'Ginty sat in his office, listening to the story from Todd. Fraser sat close by consuming vast quantities of iced water. His forehead was bound up and the scalp criss-crossed with plaster.

"I heard the tale before you arrived, Todd, but I'm glad to know your version. Now, you say that when you slipped over the wall you thought Fraser was with the boy?"

"Och, haven't I said that was an unwarranted assumption?"

"If you open that mouth again I'll choke you to death with ice-cubes!" roared Todd at the interruption.

"Naturally, Fraser thought he was with you," added M'Ginty soothingly. "But the point is that he is now under arrest. The police or marine patrol, whichever they were, picked him up in the courtyard lying across Price's dead body. Is that right?"

"Yes, but remember the circumstances, Paddy. We had had a pretty lively scrap and had dashed out from the lighted room into the darkness.

Mayne had no knife in his hand; I'll swear to that!"

The fat man tapped his fingers on the table. "I accept that, of course, but we are faced with a murder charge. I liked the boy when he was here and, apart from your theory, I don't think he's the sort to stick a knife in Price's ribs."

"Averse as I am to violence, I'd have slit him if I'd seen him!"

Todd looked round at the speaker. "Angus Fraser, get back to the ship! If it hadn't been for you there'd have been no trouble. For two pins I'd fire you!"

"Fire me? *Me?* And who would run the engines?"

In spite of his indignant protests the engineer was bundled out into the street and the conversation resumed.

"Todd, you and I have always had a high opinion of each other?"

"Ah! Hm!"

"Price was a bad egg—a wanted man, certainly in the States if not here. He was after salvaging gold, eh?"

"I don't know. Was he?" Todd was cautious.

"Well, whether he was or not doesn't matter to him now. That leaves you in the running, my friend. Do you know who is the rightful owner, Todd? I'm not asking the question really, because, between ourselves, neither of us can answer it. Do you agree?"

Todd was in the dark as to McGinty's knowledge

and a lot of it might be bluff; but, on the other hand, the man was trustworthy.

"Paddy, I had a long story from Price which was probably a pack of lies, but I don't know the truth."

"That's what I'm saying. Neither of us knows. The U.S. Navy has laid a claim."

"*What?*" Todd sat forward with a jerk. Bucking interested parties was one thing, but the Navy was another. If the gold were to be raised the diving gear could only be obtained privately from M'Ginty, and that meant taking him into partnership.

"I've never admitted there is any gold, Paddy."

The fat man smiled and sunk his chin into rolls of bulging flesh.

"No, but just suppose there was some—suppose that a destroyer poked her nose in at the critical moment?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm pointing out the danger of running round looking for something to which you have no title. The position is that the U.S. Navy know of the stuff's existence and have some sort of legal claim, whereas you have none, but you know where it is."

Todd stroked his unshaven chin. "So what?"

"Don't you see? I'm the only man that can put the deal through. I know the strength of both sides. This is my idea of the set-up. I supply you with the necessary diving equipment and you lift the gold, then hand it over to the U.S. authorities,

charging full salvage fees, plus a small cut over and above that. In the meantime, I'll arrange that you have a free hand."

"I suppose you're right, Paddy, but you don't know the full strength of the story. There's somebody else on the job and he's a pretty fast worker."

M'Ginty looked interested. "Anybody I know?"

"Maybe. He calls himself Smith and runs the two-masted schooner *Albatross*."

"Oh, yes, the *Albatross*. She sails to-morrow—no, curse it, it's to-morrow already. She will put out this afternoon. I don't know Smith by name, but I expect I should recognise him. I can fix it that she doesn't sail. You notice, Todd, how handy it is to have friends in the Navy."

"That's all right. We can arrange all that later, but what's worrying me is the boy. I've got a soft spot for the kid and we've got to free him somehow, if it means busting open the *calabozo*."

M'Ginty sat forward with a frown.

"Busting the jail is a last resource and wouldn't be easy. Remember we're in the Canal Zone. What evidence do they hold against him? It will be easier to bust that open."

"As far as I know, the only evidence ~~is~~ that he was found lying across Price's body with a knife on the ground."

"Any fingerprints on it?"

"No; the handle was bound with rope."

"Good! Then, it's a lawyer's job, Todd. He's too young to be held on the charge, I fancy. Any-

way, as soon as it's light I'll phone my man to come over and handle the affair."

"Can't we bail him out?" Todd had a poor idea of the comfort offered in the local prisons.

"Go down now, you mean? Yes, all right; we might manage it. Depends who is in charge. I can pull some pretty powerful strings in these parts. It won't do any harm."

M'Ginty rose but the other checked him.

"One moment, Paddy. Reverting to the other affair, I'm agreeable, but I want a guarantee from the Yanks to the effect that our arrangement becomes operative from the date of sailing." The fat man nodded and pondered the request for some time. There was a catch somewhere, but he was unable to locate it.

"Well?" said Todd.

"Er—yes, all right. I'll fix that."

Todd kept a straight face, with the knowledge that the gold already aboard the *Mona* was his own secret.

The ramshackle, rusty old Ford, which M'Ginty chose to use as though to advertise his lack of means, drew up outside the police office and the two men went inside. The night officer in charge took small notice of Todd, but there was a note of respect in his voice as he addressed the other.

"Morning, Mr. M'Ginty. An early call?"

"Hooker, you've got a kid here called Mayne. He's held on some rubbishing charge which won't hold water for five minutes when my attorney

starts talking, May I take him home to breakfast?"

"Mayne? Oh, yeah. I remember. Friend of yours?"

"Look, I'm busy and I want to get home, not talk. Are you playing ball, or do I have to pull the Chief of Police out of his bed?" A spectator might have gathered the impression that the police force belonged personally to M'Ginty.

"I reckon that someone's fooling. That kid was bailed an hour ago."

"*What?*" shouted Todd, advancing to the desk. "How could he be bailed? I'm his only friend in this town."

"Don't shout at me. I'm telling you he was bailed."

"Leave this to me, Todd," said M'Ginty, pushing the other back from the desk.

"Who bailed him, Hooker?" A book was twisted round for them to read. "Hm! The name means nothing. What did the guy look like?"

"I don't know that I took much notice. Ordinary sort of fellow."

"But you don't release people to anybody that just happens along?"

"No, Mr. M'Ginty, but this guy had a letter from a firm of attorneys and the coin in his hand. What's the trouble?"

"Nothing. Have a smoke?" A cigar was passed across the desk and M'Ginty motioned Todd outside.

"No use talking in there any longer, Todd. The kid's gone. Who bailed him?"

"One of the Smith gang."

"Why?"

Todd had a shrewd idea but he was not anxious to share his knowledge.

"How the blazes do I know? The point is to find him. That's *your* job, Paddy."

"You reckon he's some sort of hostage? Yes, I think I get it. Somebody holds the boy to prevent you sailing. Well, that won't work because they'll find *they* can't sail, either. Get back to your ship and give me a few hours to set my organisation working. I'll have news of the kid if he's in town. Get everything arranged on board and I'll give you the word when I've fixed things with the Navy."

"I don't sail without the kid."

M'Ginty shot the Captain a quick look at the tone of voice. Todd was serious.

"But there's no need to hold everything up because of that. I'll search for him, but it may take a day or so."

"Then I'll sail in a day or so." The line of Todd's jaw was very square. "Listen, Paddy, the Navy don't know the location of the gold, and they never will until that boy is returned."

"I always thought you were a tough guy."

"That's my business. I've told you the position and I'm not budging. I've done some fairly shady deals in my time, but never at the expense of a kid of that age."

They sat in the car, arguing outside the police office. Dawn was not far away.

"You're throwing away a packet of money for a whim."

"Will you mind your own goldarned business? If I sail, that boy will be found drowned next day. Right?"

The fat man sucked his lips as though undecided.

"Todd, there's more in this affair than you've told me. There's something about the kid that's queer."

"Just as you like. There's something queer about your side, too. What do you get out of the affair? Why are you so bothered about Uncle Sam's rights?"

"Suppose we stop asking each other questions and get down to business? I'll do all I can to find the boy."

"Right, Paddy. Start the flivver and drop me down the harbour."

"The *Albatross* is lying at No. 3 Quay," said M'Ginty. "Reckon I'd better start searching from that point." The self-starter whirred.

"Start where you like, but you won't find the youngster on board the *Albatross*. They're too fly for that!"

When John recovered consciousness he found himself in a police patrol van with several other captives. His head ached and his stomach felt queasy, but he struggled against the sickness.

Leaving the van at police headquarters, they had all been lined up in a row for the police official to take particulars. The company in which he had travelled were all charged with breaking the peace and were quickly hustled off to the lock-ups. John was left alone while two officers conversed about him in quiet tones. A rope-handled knife was handed up to the senior official, who regarded it while scratching his head with a pen. Finally he shook his head, then announced that John would be held for a time on the same charge as the others.

Possibly on account of his age, he was locked in a separate room. It was not a cell, but looked like one of the officers' bedrooms. The only difference from a normal bedroom was the set of iron bars which covered the window.

He sat by the table and tried to figure out his position. There was little enough to worry about, as far as he could see. There had been a fight in the café, he had been knocked out, and would probably be fined five dollars for brawling. It was a nuisance, but might have been much worse. Suddenly, the door opened and the senior police officer stood by the jamb.

"Say, kid, you're in a bit of a hole!" he said.

"Oh, I don't mind all that much." John grinned at the serious expression on the officer's face. People always assumed that life was different for young men. "It was a good fight while it lasted."

"Fight? Oh, I see. P'raps it was, but I'm talking

about what happened afterwards. Was that knife yours?"

"Do you mean the one that was handed up to you?"

"Yeah."

"Never seen it before. It looked like a sea-man's."

"You reckon, then, that somebody else slashed that fellow?"

John was becoming more and more puzzled. The officer noticed the expression and marked it mentally to John's credit. "You were picked up lying across a dead man. He had been knifed. Know anything about that?" he asked.

John's inclination was to laugh at the stupidity of the suggestion, then he realised that he was in police custody and there was a corpse to explain. He swallowed, then gave a brief description of the events of the evening, finishing with the two shadowy figures he had seen. The officer considered the story whilst picking his teeth.

"This talk, youngster, is off the record. Get me? You don't have to talk about anything without witnesses."

The information was given half good-naturedly, half grudgingly. John's eyes opened wider.

"But you aren't suggesting that *I* killed him?"

"I wouldn't know about that, but somebody did. If you could swear that you saw somebody else stick him—do you get me?"

John realised that the man was doing his best

for him, probably going further than his duty permitted.

"I'm afraid that I've told you all I know. Anything more would be guesswork."

The officer sighed.

"Yeah. I guess you're telling the truth—mind you, that's off the record. I really ought to be grilling you, but I've got a soft spot for kids."

"Kid! I'm not such a kid as you seem to think."

The officer grinned at the naïve reply and John followed suit. The grins broke into chuckles, then the man pulled himself up.

"This is no laughing matter. Now, listen carefully; you're charged with breaking the peace at the moment, and I've no evidence offered to make it anything more. Get hold of a good lawyer in the morning, see? Tell him your story and do as he says. If he says skip, then skip."

"I couldn't do that."

"Eh, why not?" The conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door. The officer left him and turned the key. John was beginning to take stock of his position when the door opened again and he was taken to the office. His late friend now sat behind his high desk, wearing his stern, official expression. A civilian lounged against a rail and surveyed John as he walked in.

"Here's your client, Mr. Mendoza, and he'll cost you fifty bucks. Sign the book and read the usual bits about your responsibilities. John Mayne, you're bailed by this attorney and will appear

here when ordered. Mr. Mendoza will explain all that to you. Here, take this pen and sign on this line. Right, that's all, and good morning."

John did as he was told and was shepherded out of the office by the lawyer. A closed car stood in the road and they got in and were swished off in the first light of morning.

"Are we going to the *Mona*?" asked the boy.

"Yes, later on. I'm taking you to my office first, purely as a formality. We shan't be long."

John leaned back against the cushions and yawned. Breakfast, he thought, would be welcome. The car purred on, threading its way through empty streets, all strange to his eyes. They stopped after fifteen minutes in front of a house standing well back from the road. It was not John's idea of an office, but presumably the lawyer had taken him to his private house. A Mexican ushered them in and showed them to a room on the first floor. A man rose from an armchair and turned round to face them. John sucked in his breath. 'It was Smith!

"Welcome, mon amigo." He waved his hand to a chair. "Any trouble?" The lawyer shook his head, then turned and left the room.

"You hardly expected to find me here, of course?" went on Smith. "I wanted a quiet chat with you on the subject of Shark Island."

John crossed his legs in the chair and listened while trying to determine his course of action.

"I've gone to a lot of trouble to pull you out of

that police headquarters, which you will agree is a friendly action. You may say that Todd would have done so later, but you're wrong. He daren't do it for fear of compromising himself. He may have been seen in the courtyard."

"You mean he would desert me? You think again."

"Have it your own way. I got you clear and I'm going to put you aboard the *Mona*. Fair enough, isn't it?"

"Where's the catch?"

"There's no catch. Use your intelligence. What use are you to me? You can tell me nothing that I don't know. I already know where the wreck lies and I saw Todd lift a packet of gold bricks in his net. That's right enough, isn't it?"

John hesitated. On the surface the question was harmless enough. There was no doubt that Smith did know, and yet, and yet—why the question if he already knew?

"Why ask me if you know so much?" he returned.

Smith made a mistake. It was only a fleeting change of expression, but it gave John the clue. The man's eyes flashed angrily at the counter question.

"You do agree with me, then?" It was too late; the trap was sprung. The first part of Smith's question had been cleverly inserted to cover the second part. He could not be certain that the net had contained gold; therefore, it was only surmise.

"It's not a matter of agreement, Mr. Smith, but rather of principle. I might agree or deny, but I prefer to say nothing. When the *Mona* was at Shark Island I was an employee; would you expect one of your men to discuss business affairs with Captain Todd?"

Smith smiled, then selected a cigarette from his case. John leaned back in the chair with his arms resting on the sides. The match flared up and he idly watched it flick into the fireplace. Next moment Smith sprang from the chair, gripping his victim's wrist. The lighted end of the cigarette had only rested on the back of John's hand for a moment, but it was agony. He clenched his teeth and dropped back into the chair.

"Painful? Strange, is it not? You'd think the flesh would extinguish the tobacco, but it doesn't—not for some time. Todd *did* bring up gold, didn't he?"

The smooth voice spoke softly, but the boy could detect the undercurrent of venom. The threat was there.

"Answer me, you cub!" The softness had disappeared.

John gripped the arms of the chair and waited.

"You little fool! I thought you had intelligence. Did the cigarette give you no ideas?" Smith's face leant across until it was only a few inches from him. To take the man by the throat was his urge, but commonsense held him back. Smith was too strong and would have assistance within call.

"I'd like a little time to consider the matter."

It was only with the greatest effort that John was able to speak the words without a quaver.

"You can have an hour." Smith glanced at his watch. "At the end of that you'll answer my questions. It's pretty certain that gold came up and I want to know how much and where it's stored. Don't try to fox me, boy; it's not worth it. Just consider your alternatives: instant release for a few words, or else—well—I'll leave it to your imagination. Think it over."

The cellar to which the prisoner was taken was dim but cool. He had asked for food and water, but both had been refused. The chamber—it was hardly a room—contained a chair, while in the corner was a pile of old sacks. The door was heavy and securely locked, and the only light came from a narrow, barred ventilator in the wall. Escape was out of the question. Hopelessly John made a circuit of the stone walls, then sat despondently on the rickety chair. What to do? Tell or not? To die at his age was absurd, yet to tell Smith what he wanted would shatter his conscience. If his faith and self-respect went he would lose all grip on life, everything he had been taught to value. Nobody knew where he was, so rescue was impossible. He wished he had not asked for time, for the balancing of the courses open was worse than facing what was to come.

Some time later, the door opened. A man stripped to the waist beckoned and John followed

him up the stairs. A feeling of numbness began to creep up his body and his legs seemed to move of their own accord. He no longer felt frightened. Nothing mattered very much now, and it would not last long.

Smith turned round as he stood by the window and pushed the latticed shutters to. The oily, ingratiating smile on his face made John's hands itch. He found himself holding his cap in his hands and realised that he would not need that much longer. As Smith approached John flicked his hand up and the greasy cap struck the man's cheek. It was nothing more than a flip of cloth, but the face reddened as though struck a mighty blow. The eyes flashed with anger and the man's breath came with a hiss.

John laughed. Smith's mouth gibbered for a moment as he fought for speech. He was insane with rage.

"Strip him to the waist! Lash him to the chair!"

Coat and shirt were removed and then the rope cut into his flesh. Tighter and tighter it pulled until he was rigid in the chair. A gag was tied round his mouth and then Smith picked up a bamboo cane. What was to follow, John never knew, for at that moment the latticed shutter swung back and the mouth of a revolver poked into the room.

"Don't move!" came a stern voice.

He recognised it as that of M'Ginty's servant. Smith and the half-breed stood in the middle of the room like statues, while John tugged hopelessly

at his bonds. The gun was followed by an arm and then the figure hoisted itself level with the window-frame. The man was poised half in and half out, and Smith must have realised that the position was a difficult one from which to fire. His hand dropped to a tray lying on the table, and, although John gurgled a warning through his gag, the missile shot through the opening of the window. The rescuer dropped his gun, hand to the frame to steady himself, and at that moment Smith and his assistant darted to the door, unlocked it, and disappeared.

It seemed minutes before John was finally released. First, the man shouted to somebody below that the birds had flown, then his gag was removed, and finally the ropes were cut. He now found that movement was impossible, since the ropes had cut in so deep that the circulation was all but stopped. Before he was ready to leave, the door opened and in waddled M'Ginty.

"Did you catch them?" John asked.

"No, young man, they were too fast for me, but the main thing is to have you back with us. Come on, let's get off to the *Mona* and give Todd a shock."

"But what about the police? I'm on bail."

"I'll fix all that. I know now who did the job."

"Who was it, sir?"

"Price was knifed by one of Smith's gang. We'll continue to call him Smith, as that's the name you know. It seems that Price went to the

'Blue Moon' in search of his own gang and he was spotted. I leave the rest to your imagination."

"Smith and Price, presumably, were old enemies?"

"That's it, boy."

"But what was Fraser doing there?"

• "I should say it was coincidence. You know that Todd is aiming to sail with the morning tide?"

"I didn't know, but I don't think reporting to the police will delay him unduly."

"If you insist."

While they were talking they had moved downstairs and seated themselves in M'Ginty's ramshackle car. Ten minutes brought them to the centre of the town and they entered the police office.

"Well, Chief, here's your man, and he's so innocent that he insists on reporting back. It's the case of Smith, you know."

"Oh, ah!" The official looked at John and then at the other.

"You know that you've got the wrong man? This kid never did the job."

"I'm inclined to agree, Mr. M'Ginty, but it's not for me to decide. I can't have people running around Town sticking knives in men. It's a matter whether the State decides to prosecute or not."

M'Ginty snorted, then pulled out a thick note-case.

"How much bail do you need?"

"He's already bailed and has reported back. I

can't let him go again until the attorney has questioned him. He should be here within a couple of hours."

"Couple of hours! That means noon before he'll be clear."

"Sorry, M'Ginty, but that's the way of it."

"All right. I'll see Todd. So long, youngster."

The hours dragged for John. He knew that the Skipper would not sail without him, but all the time hours were being lost and Smith was free. He was not very worried at the charge he might have to face, since his conscience was clear and even the police seemed to hold a favourable view of the matter.

Meanwhile, Todd, M'Ginty, and Fraser held council at the fat man's office. All the stores were aboard and the ship would sail as soon as John arrived. Surprisingly to M'Ginty, Todd agreed with the boy's action, and so there was nothing to be done but wait. They waited, but not patiently. Noon came and still there was no news from the police. M'Ginty 'phoned hourly, but they were told that the investigation was still proceeding. They had lunch and the shadows changed from one side of the house to the other.

"What's Smith doing?" asked Todd, fishing out a long black cigar.

"He's sailed."

"Sailed? But you said you could hold him, Paddy."

"Yes, but when I 'phoned the Navy Yard my

particular friend was away and I didn't feel like telling the world our business."

Todd frowned, then glanced at his Chief Engineer. Fraser was blowing flies from the tip of his nose.

"If those engines break down this trip, you'll break down with 'em!" he remarked dryly.

"Ay, mon, but they'll run all right this time. It was that main bearing on the port——"

"To blazes with your excuses! Sheer incompetence, that's what it was."

"There speaks the ignorant Sassenach."

"Mr. Fraser, I permit no swearing in my presence. Do you assure me that the engines are in good order?"

"Certainly."

"Good!" Todd blew a cloud of smoke. "Then, it's full speed ahead from the moment I ring on."

"The boilers are warm and you can have full pressure within the hour."

Captain Todd only grunted. The 'phone shrilled and M'Ginty grabbed the handpiece.

"Eh? Who's that? Oh, yes, yes. Well, Smith's gone and so you're too late. Yes, yes, it's a pity, but I couldn't get hold of you in time. All right—I'll ask him. G'bye."

The listeners looked up as M'Ginty replaced the 'phone.

"That was my pal, the Navy lieutenant. He says that as Smith has a start on him, he proposes to follow you out."

Todd blew the end of his cigar to a red glow.

"Well, I don't know, Paddy. The position has changed somewhat in the last few hours. Let's consider where we stand. First of all, we don't know when we get the boy back. Just suppose that Smith gets such a start that he has time to lift the gold?"

"Well?" said M'Ginty tensely.

"That would mean that I lose the salvage. Now if I'm operating alone, I have the chance of taking it off him. If, however, there is a nosey, long destroyer lying on my tail, then the Navy takes it. You see my point of view? I don't mind the Navy having it and drawing my cut as salvage, but I don't reckon to allow Smith to get away with it. In other words, if it isn't mine, it isn't his."

"There's something in that, Todd, except that the Navy will take it away from Smith."

The Skipper's hand smote the table and Fraser woke up with a start.

"Yes, but where's my salvage money in that event?"

"Ah!"

"Yes, ah! And so, I reckon to sail without the pleasure of the destroyer's company."

M'Ginty looked serious at the words.

"Awkward, isn't it? The lieutenant might trail you."

"Let him try. How does he keep touch during the night?"

"Searchlights and radar," put in Fraser.

Todd scowled savagely.

"We'll see about that. I reckon I'm more than a match for any half-baked lieutenant, however much gold lace he wears."

The 'phone rang again and this time it was the news for which they had been waiting. John had been released and all charges against him withdrawn. They drove down town together and, having collected the lad, made for the pier where the *Mona* lay.

CHAPTER X

A TEST OF SEAMANSHIP

DUSK was falling when Todd left the chart-house. Seamen stood by the bow and stern mooring lines, waiting to cast off, John was on the maindeck, and Anson had the watch. The Captain lifted his glasses and focused them on a long, low shape half a mile to seawards of them. There was nothing suspicious about the craft, and no reason why a destroyer should not remain in that position, but he knew that as soon as the *Mona* moved, the destroyer would become alert. There was only one way down the channel and that would pass them within two cables' distance from each other. His hand dropped to the brass knob and then the *Mona's* siren blared. It was an act of bravado or defiance, but he enjoyed it.

Below decks, Mr. Fraser sat at his control position, pencil behind ear and empty pipe in mouth. The bridge had already rung on the engines and he now awaited the usual "Slow ahead." His eyes flickered round the spotless engine-room and then to the instrument panel in front of him. This was the nerve-centre of his domain and the polished dials winked at him under the electric lights. Full speed would not be needed for an hour, so the

boilers could stand for a while. Oil was costly and Mr. Fraser abhorred waste.

"Slow ahead both." He quietly spoke the words to himself as the bell beside him clanged. Answering back, he moved the throttle and then licked his pencil before entering the time in the engine-room log book. Five minutes passed and he tired of sitting like a clerk. Calling up an assistant, he rose and walked round his property like an admiring landowner. It would be time now to increase the pressure and he passed the order to the stokehold, still called such although no coal was carried.

"Excuse me, sir, would you look at the main feed pump?"

The greaser averted his eyes from the baleful glare and led the way to the fitting. Fraser grunted, laid his hand on the steel, then hurriedly put it in his pocket. What was the matter with the con-founded thing? His expert eye ran over the fitting and could see no reason for the excessive heat. The lubricator was working—there appeared to be no reason for trouble—the bridge would demand full speed in half an hour—his thoughts went round and round.

He squirted oil from a can, waited a while, then felt the metal again. It was hotter than before. It was queer. He removed his cap, scratched, then turned round and saw three of his staff looking at him, puzzled.

"Line up here! Every man. And you, fetch the black hole in as well."

His whole staff stood before him, stretched across the gratings, and he walked slowly from one end to the other.

"All you men know me, and most of you are wondering what all this is about. One of you knows!" He paused and glared again at the faces. "Somebody, some two-faced piker, has fixed the main feed pump. If he steps forward and takes a hiding, all right. If he doesn't"—the voice dropped to a snarl—"then you've all had your last meal! Understand? No talk, no eat. Now get to blazes out of here!"

The engine-room staff jumped to it. They knew their man and they knew there was no bluff behind the words. Looking at each other suspiciously, they went about their work, muttering. It was their firm intention that the culprit should be found by breakfast time. The Chief walked back to his tiny desk and picked up the 'phone.

"Hello, yes, the Chief speaking. speaking. Captain Todd, you can ring off the engines. Eh? Yes, I know I said they were all right—so they were until somebody put a handful of sand in the pump. What's that?—Eh? Your language is a disgrace to the Service! Ah well, you should have foreseen the possibility of sabotage.—Yes, yes. How long? Probably the best part of a day. Sand is powerful stuff for destroying machinery."

The instrument was put back on its hook and then the telegraph rang: "Stop". He closed the throttle and proceeded to strip down to singlet and shorts.

The *Mona* anchored and the engine-room staff toiled like slaves. For six hours Fraser kept them at work, and the more they grumbled, the more he cursed. The pump was stripped down and the work of repair went ahead. A steward arrived with coffee and sandwiches which nearly caused a riot. The Chief sat at his desk, eating, and, although not taking much apparent notice, watched all the signs of mutiny growing. To interfere with the men's food was a serious matter, but he persisted. He noticed a knot of men beside a dynamo and they were clustered round a negro who rolled his eyes in terror.

"Come here, you black heathen!" Fraser stuffed the remaining sandwich in his mouth and regarded the man. The crew were growling and packed in a bunch, but he affected not to notice.

"Turn out your pockets!" The voice was menacing.

"Hm! And where did you get a hundred-dollar bill from? All right, don't bluster. I know where it came from."

The negro was petrified with terror at being discovered.

"Pete, lock him in the lamp store. I'll fix him later. I'll show him whether he can monkey with my engines! The rest of you, get to breakfast."

The staff rushed for the ladders in a body. They were not interested in Mr. Fraser's engines, but they resented any interference with their own.

Breakfast was finished in the saloon, but the air

was tense. Smith now had far more start than Todd liked.

"There was a lot to be said for the old days of sail. When everybody had to rely on a slant of wind, there was none of this messing around with engines," he observed.

"We've been unfortunate, sir," ventured Anson.

"Bah! Cursed, you mean. If we'd had a decent engineer below, the engines would have run. Feed pumps and such poppycock!"

John focused his glasses through a porthole.

"The destroyer is still in the same position, sir," he said.

"Yes, that's the only good thing about the whole business. That lieutenant must be worrying himself to death."

The long morning wore on and the sun climbed high. The breeze died away, and even under the deck awnings the heat was intense. John shuddered as he thought of the engine-room staff sweating below decks with the sun beating on the steel hull. The afternoon passed, and then Mr. Fraser appeared on deck. He was clad in white ducks and was closely shaven, but his eyes were bloodshot and sunk deep in their sockets. His hands were red and liberally decorated with sticking plaster.

"Steam for half-speed in twenty minutes, sir."

Todd glared and was about to make a cutting retort, but he suddenly realised the effort that had been made below decks.

"Very good, Chief. Come below for a drink. Mr. Anson, make ready for shortening-to your anchor."

The two old friends disappeared below and Anson winked at John, happy that peace was restored. Ten minutes later John went to the bridge and was shortly joined by the Captain. Two large, rusty freighters were clearing their anchorage and they idly watched them follow each other in line ahead. Todd motioned to John to ring on the engines, then gazed pensively at the smoke-stacks moving slowly out to sea. The anchor was weighed and the *Mona* slid slowly down the channel. As they passed the destroyer a junior officer waved a hand as though in greeting, but Todd still peered at the old freighters.

"I've got an idea, youngster. Follow those old tubs and increase to half-speed. It looks to me as though they're bound for a West Coast port."

John moved the wheel and the *Mona* swung in a wide arc on to the foamy trail of the freighters. Casting a glance astern, he saw smoke rising from the destroyer's funnels.

Within two hours the light was failing and the four ships had taken up their positions as though in convoy. The freighters steamed abreast with nearly a mile between them, and the *Mona* lay between them level with their sterns. The destroyer took position a mile astern of the *Mona*. Navigation lights were switched on and the convoy steamed quietly ahead at eight knots. Pres-

ently, the weather changed, and for half an hour a tropical rain fell, deluging the decks with streams of water. The temperature dropped and then a few wisps of fog appeared. Sometimes it was clear and sometimes the bow of the *Mona* was hidden from the bridge. Todd sniffed the air and gazed round as far as he could see.

"Full speed ahead." The engines increased to full pressure and then John saw the ship gradually draw up between the great freighters. As the mist skirled he caught sight of their port and starboard lights, but the destroyer's lights astern seemed to be fading in intensity.

"Everything depends on that lieutenant not smelling a rat. If he increases he'll find we've gone ahead."

"Is that likely?" asked John.

"No. He's got a valuable ship and a good job to lose. It's ticklish work passing between two big ships in a fog. I think he'll keep station."

"The freighter to port, sir, seems to be swinging out of station."

"Get your sextant and take a bearing on their starboard light. Likely enough, they're sheering off to give themselves sea-way."

It was now both dark and foggy and John had an unpleasant feeling of being uncomfortably near to two big ships. The *Mona* was now well ahead of the convoy and travelling fast.

"Out lights!" In a moment the ship was plunged in darkness and the mist swirled round

the bridge ever thicker. Another three minutes passed and John could see Captain Todd gripping the bridge rail as he peered seawards left and right.

"Twenty degrees starboard!" John caught his breath as he turned the spokes and watched the compass card swing. The Captain was intending to cross the bows of the ship to their right, and somewhere out there in the blackness were eight thousand tons of steel moving at eight knots on an unknown course. With the fog closing down the freighter might alter course. Worried, he tried to figure the position. They were travelling along one side of a triangle at twelve knots, so they should cross the T within a few——

"Stop both!" The order came quietly but incisively.

The engines stopped and the deckplates beneath their feet ceased vibrating. There was nothing to be seen but fog. Where were they? John shot a look at the Captain. Supposing they had stopped too soon? Suppose the freighter had swung to starboard——? Zoom! A green rocket burst high up over their stern and illuminated the fog bank. It was clear enough a hundred feet above sea level.

"That won't help them. The destroyer is looking for us, but she's too late." Todd laughed as he spoke. Two more rockets flared up, but the fog held the *Mona* blanketed.

"Hm! That puts paid to the U.S. Navy. There'll

be some awful bad language on their navigating bridge!"

John huddled into his oilskins as the Skipper laughed. They lay gently rolling for another half-hour, and then, still without lights, forged ahead at half-speed. The fog had prevented the use of searchlights and the presence of so many ships had rendered the radar installation useless.

"Have they any idea, sir, of our destination?"

"It's difficult to say, John. The wreck is somewhere off the mainland—that's obvious from lack of common knowledge. A wreck would be reported within a very short time of going ashore, so the probability is that we are making for an island. The point is, which? That is something the lieutenant has to solve."

The ship drove on through the night at full speed. Her lights were on, but beyond that precaution Todd ignored the weather. His only excuse was the vastness of the Pacific off the steamer routes. John brewed some coffee and the talk turned on Price.

"You ask why was Price knifed?" Todd put down his mug. "I should say that he went to the 'Blue Moon' to meet his gang of toughs and while waiting was recognised by Smith and company. His end was probably unpremeditated, but the advent of the police frightened them and they put him out. It's guesswork, I admit."

"Yes, so I suppose, sir. What do you expect to find at Shark Island?"

"Don't know, but I fear Smith will be there and quite possibly with most of the gold aboard his schooner. We may be fortunate if he misses that open hatch. That's really our only hope, but he's such a slippery customer that he's not likely to overlook much."

"I wonder what he has prepared for us this time?"

"Meaning what?" inquired Todd.

"Well, last time he surprised us with a machine-gun."

"Ha-ha! I see. You think he may have shipped a couple of six-inch guns?" They both laughed at the idea.

"I meant, sir, that he knows that we are on his trail this trip, and therefore will be prepared for trouble."

"That's true. There will be plenty when I open the headlands of the lagoon."

A breeze sprang up from the north-east and within a few minutes the fog had disappeared. With the removal of the wet blanket the temperature rose and the tension of the officers relaxed.

"Why not go below and turn in?" Todd peeled off his oilskins as he spoke.

"I'd rather finish the watch, sir. I wonder what I shall be doing in, say, a month's time? May I stay on the *Mona*?"

"I don't think it would be wise. I see nothing against the life, mark you. Tramping from port to port gives variety and you never know where

you're likely to be next week, but, on the other hand, I feel it's the wrong start for a youngster. You see, the life doesn't suit everybody, and when you're young you need young company. My proposition is to send you to England for a year's schooling at a nautical training establishment, and then get you a junior officer's berth on one of the big lines."

"I don't care much for the idea of school."

Todd laughed. "It's not the ordinary sort of school that I have in mind, and it's only for a year. When you've done your year at sea with a cargo liner, we'll discuss the future."

"You mean, I could come back then?" John hung on the Captain's answer.

"Yes, if you wish, and as soon as you reach the minimum age I'll sign you as second mate. Don't forget, lad, when you're twenty-one you'll have a few thousands in the bank."

"Thousands?" spluttered John.

"Certainly. I'm splitting your share of the gold as though you already ranked as second officer."

"It seems very generous of you. I didn't do very much for all that sum of money."

"Rubbish!" Todd chortled. "Even the cabin steward will receive his share, and what did he do towards the job?"

"So you're dividing the whole amount, sir?"

"Yes, I'm treating the operation as though it were a straightforward salvage job."

They had the bridge to themselves and John was

acting quartermaster. The first tinge of pink was visible in the east and the sea was scarcely rippled.

"Where did you hide the gold, sir?"

The Skipper chortled and turned a laughing face to his junior.

"You'll know in good time,' so for the moment let it be. Well, I'm going below. Make eight bells and rouse out Mr. Anson."

CHAPTER XI

THE EFFECT OF A MINE

THE *Mona* stood in towards the headlands marking the lagoon entrance. The bridge telescope, a powerful instrument, had picked out the schooner as she lay approximately over the wreck.

"Well, there she is, and we're too late. I wonder if Smith has lifted the stuff yet?" Todd nodded his face as he spoke, for the sun beat down on the awnings like fire.

"There's somebody signalling, sir, from the headland."

"Hm! Ring down to 'Slow' and give me the glass."

John waited while the Skipper made his inspection.

"By thunder! He's had the confounded impudence to erect a signal yard at the entrance. There goes the hoist."

Todd stood staring at the flags as they moved up the halliard. He commenced reading the signal slowly: "Entrance boomed and mined. Keep out." The Captain's brow was black with rage as he lowered the glass, then suddenly his sense of humour took charge.

"Of all the impertinent blackguards! He's

boomed and mined the entrance. What do you know about that?"

"Sheer bluff," muttered Anson, standing next to John.

Todd turned slowly to his First Officer and stared hard.

"Oh, so you'd ignore the signal and go straight ahead, eh?"

Mr. Anson shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"Er—no. I should send a boat through."

"I see. Very well, clear away a boat and go ahead. I'll stay here and watch what happens."

The young officer flushed at the cutting words and wished he had not spoken.

"There are some stakes, Mr. Anson, which are too high to call. If it is a bluff, he wins; I'm not risking it. Ring off the engines, John, and drop anchor."

Todd moved to the 'phone and invited Mr. Fraser to lunch with them on the comparatively cool bridge. The steward set out a table and they stood about, eating informally.

"And you mean to say we steamed all this way to look at a lagoon? Mon, it's a powerful waste of oil."

Todd pushed a cheese sandwich in his mouth.

"The Chief says it's a waste, gentlemen. Let's have the opinion of the Picts and Scots on our procedure."

"Captain Todd, your humour is coarse like your language. My opinions are valuable, but they

would not be of any use because you wouldn't listen to them."

"Ha! The black hole stands on its dignity. What do you say, Mr. Anson?"

That officer was chary of committing himself since he had already made one *gaffe*. Pondering the matter, he shook his head.

"John, any ideas?"

"I think we might take the boom in flank during the night. If we landed well away from the headlands we might creep up and overpower the guard."

"Well spoken, laddie. That's the very thing I had in mind."

"You old humbug!" muttered Todd, but the Chief affected not to hear. "It has points, John, but there's a danger of one of our parties firing on the other. You'd both be blazing away across the mouth."

"Suppose, sir, we waited outside? He must come out some time," suggested Anson.

"Agreed." Todd stroked his nose thoughtfully. "But it will be at his choosing, and if a blow comes up we might have to run before it. There's no shelter around here."

"Why not wireless the Navy?"

John's suggestion was considered then Todd shook his head.

"I don't like that. It savours of calling the police. It goes against the grain to call for help. No, I'd rather deal with the scoundrel myself if

it's possible, although I don't want to lose any more of the crew."

Fraser took a long drink and smacked his lips.

"You have given up the idea of taking the gold off Smith?"

"Yes, Angus, I've given the matter some thought the last couple of days and I've changed my views. You see, the Navy know rather too much about the whole affair now. If I took it, after a while of a fight, Smith would squeal and we might have an awkward time. Our only chance would be to get clear away, cache it somewhere, then lie low for weeks. As we stand now, we're reasonably safe. Nobody outside the *Mona* knows whether we lifted gold or rubbish. Smith has played me several dirty tricks and, gold or no gold, I'm after *him!*"

It was finally agreed after another hour's talk that John's original idea should be tried. The headlands were to be secured and the boom destroyed. Todd estimated that by the following afternoon they should be in a position to steam through and tackle the schooner. The two parties were to land at the same time as far as possible, about two hundred yards from their respective headlands, and were to advance as cover offered. Each party was to carry a signal rocket revolver, one green, and the other red. The starboard party with the green rocket was to open the battle, and the port party was to keep under cover until a green rocket was fired. The positions were then

to be reversed. Todd's aim was to reduce the danger of hitting each other in the dark.

To John's disappointment, he was left in charge of the ship while Anson and the Captain led the raiding parties. At eleven-thirty the men, six to each boat, quietly slid down the ropes and took their places at the oars. They were all dressed in blue so that the moon should not reflect from tropical wear. The night was dark and as favourable as they could wish. With a quietly spoken word of good luck, they pushed off and John stood on the bridge, listening to the faint beat of the oars. The boats were rowed slowly so as to prevent any phosphorescent foam from bubbling in their wake.

"They're off, Duncan," said John to the old quartermaster standing beside him.

"Yes, sir, and there'll be trouble enough in half an hour."

Captain Todd sat with his hand on the tiller, wondering what the night would bring forth. Gently the blades swished the water, then quietly swung back for the next stroke. The crew each had a rifle slung across his shoulder and Todd carried a pair of pistols in his belt.

"Easy all. Let her run." He peered forward and heard rather than saw the line where the sea washed the sand. Gently the boat's keel took the beach and they clambered into the water. The boat was hauled well up and, with the Captain in the lead, they struck up the bank to the scrub

growth on top of the land spit. They advanced fifty yards and then, at a given signal, went to ground. Todd took a rough bearing on the *Mona's* lights and glanced at his watch. It was five minutes to twelve and they were late. He raised himself and they went forward another fifty yards. Suddenly the searchlight opened and an intense beam shone through the entrance of the lagoon. Todd's idea was that the light would distract the guards' attention, so as it flashed on he took his party on again.

"Down!" They fell to earth, then wriggled three to each side of him. Rifle-bolts clicked as shells were pumped into the breeches. The searchlight cut off and then the Captain fired a shot into the blackness. There was a shout and a scurrying somewhere ahead, and then came an irregular burst of fire.

"Fire at the flashes."—Todd's men loosed off and for some seconds attackers and attacked fired blindly at each other. Again the Captain looked at the luminous dial of his watch.

"Cease fire." He pulled the trigger and a green rocket zipped up and burst overhead. It was the signal for Anson, and Todd's party kept their heads down. He chuckled softly as he imagined the guards' surprise. A roar of musketry ripped out ahead and some of the bullets pinged close by. Suddenly three rockets flashed up and burst one after the other—red, green, and white.

"What the devil does that mean?" Almost as he spoke to himself he realised that the enemy was signalling. Anson's fire had slackened as though he was in doubt. By a stroke of bad luck the scheme had miscarried and neither he nor Anson could rely on their signalling arrangements. Tat-tat-tat. Tat-tat-tat. The staccato noise of a machine-gun broke out and was answered by another.

"Down! Keep your heads down!" A spray of hot lead zipped along the spit and Todd had little doubt that the other gun was sweeping Anson's position.

There was nothing left but withdrawal, for to rush the guards, as had been intended, would be suicidal. He fired two green rockets in succession, which was Anson's agreed signal to retire, then ordered his men to fall back.—Tat-tat-tat!—Short bursts of fire were being directed towards their late position and to retire they had to crawl on hands and knees. Reaching the boat, they lost no time in pushing her down the beach and scrambling aboard.

"Give way, but don't get excited. Make it a long, easy stroke."

They could see the orange spurts from the headlands and hoped their boat would not be noticed. Suddenly, one of the crew called out in an excited tone: "Man in the water, sir, swimming towards us!" Todd looked over and saw a head bobbing up and down. Three strokes took them near

enough, then the swimmer was hauled over the gunwale.

"By the Seven Stars! It's King!"

"Shut up! Not so much noise!" The boat proceeded once more and King lay in the bottom, recovering his breath. The silhouette of the *Mona* was visible, but nothing could be seen of Anson's boat.

Todd bent down and spoke to King.

"What were you up to?"

"I was trying to escape, sir. Honest I was! I'm a good swimmer and was making for the *Mona*."

"Ah, were you now? And why should I give you shelter? You're a mutinous dog and you deserted once."

"That Smith is a cruel devil, sir! He had me in his power and he made use of it."

"So should I. What's the position on the schooner?"

"They reckon to have the rest of the gold up by to-morrow night. They've been working like slaves at it all day."

"Hm! And where is Smith bound for when he leaves here?"

"I don't know, sir. He wouldn't tell me anything like that. He's fully stocked with victuals and water, so it might be anywhere."

"Yes, I don't suppose it will be Panama."

The two boats arrived within a minute of each other. Anson reported a man with a slight shoulder wound where a bullet had grazed the flesh. That

was the only casualty in the whole party and Todd considered himself lucky. The officers sat down to a late supper in the saloon, while King, suitably warned as to his future conduct, was handed over to Plumley.

"I suppose we must reckon to-night as a complete failure?" Todd remarked glumly.

"Ay, it was a little foolhardy," agreed Fraser.

"But I thought it was your idea?" countered Todd.

"Hardly that. It was the wee laddie's."

"That is just what I should expect from a Scotsman."

Fraser looked away and sighed appealingly.

"Did King say anything about the boom, sir?"

"Yes, John, he said it was a mighty thick chain and would stop most forms of ramming. It must weigh tons. It also appears there there are canisters of explosives suspended from the chain in three places."

"Huh! That may be just talk."

"Mr. Fraser, I'm quite aware of that, and we've talked about it before. I'm not taking any chances of having my bows blown away."

"What is the next step, sir?" asked Anson sleepily.

"Bed. I'm dog-tired, for one. Plumley had better take the anchor watch."

Morning brought a steaming atmosphere. The sun was red and the sea like a mirror. The palms nodded and drooped their leaves and a heat haze

hung over the lagoon. John, dressed in singlet, shorts, and sun helmet, lazily swept the horizon with his glass. Suddenly he stiffened, put down his binoculars, and focused the powerful bridge telescope. The tripod mast and squat funnels denoted a warship. He 'phoned the Captain, then checked the steamer's course. She was making for the island and a smoke-cloud poured from her funnels.

"Give me that glass. Huh! Wasting oil—not enough draught. About five miles off and coming up fast. That's our friend with the gold lace."

"I thought she looked familiar, sir."

"Yes, that's the *Batswing*, right enough." Todd laid down the glass, stared at John, then burst out laughing.

"I'm just picturing that lieutenant's face when I tell him about the boom. Ha-ha!"

"What will Smith do?"

"From what I know of him he won't give in without a fight. I wouldn't miss to-day's work for a pension. Run up our ensign and give him a salute as he comes in."

The destroyer slackened speed, the smoke-cloud changed to a pale grey wisp, and then she turned to bring the two ships alongside. The *Mona's* tattered flag was dipped and the *Batswing* made dutiful acknowledgment. Two cables distant, she dropped anchor and John saw a smart launch lowered from her davits.

"Remain on the bridge and listen to the conver-

sation. A witness is sometimes useful, so I'll leave the door open."

Todd winked as he went down the ladder to greet the approaching officer.

Lieut. Davis, U.S.N., was tall and lean, with dangling arms which reached nearly to his knees. His face was red and so was his hair. John touched his helmet as the white-clad officer passed into the chart-house.

"Highball, lieutenant?" said the Captain.

"No, thanks. Too early. You say this guy has put a chain boom across the entrance? You *are* serious, Skipper?"

"Well, you don't have to take my word for it—any more than for the mines. Do just as you think fit."

Todd lit one of his black cigars and sat back to enjoy himself.

"Thanks, I will. You haven't been drinking in the hot sun by any chance? Mines! It sounds like a penny dreadful. People can't run around sowing mines. It's a criminal offence—I reckon guy would get twenty years for that."

"Well, it's a beautiful morning. Why not steam straight in? I don't know whether your chart is accurate, but the depth at the entrance is a shade over eight fathoms."

"Never you mind about my charts." Mr. Davis was becoming peevish and curt. Todd's story was probably some plot to prevent him entering.

"Do you know Smith?" asked the Captain.

"No, but I aim to meet him this morning. I've a good mind to order you to go in ahead of me."

"No harm in ordering." Todd flicked the cigar ash off nonchalantly. "The trouble is that I don't fly the U.S. flag, neither is this island U.S. territory."

"Consider yourself under arrest!" The words shot out like a bullet. Captain Todd should realise his power.

"You're travelling a shade fast, mister. What's the charge?"

"Navigating during the hours of darkness without lights and endangering shipping by crossing a steamer's bows in a fog without due warning."

"You must be dreaming."

"I'm escorting you back to Panama and then we'll see which of us is dreaming."

"Tut, tut! Naughty!"

"That's the way of it, Captain."

Todd rocked himself in his chair while he studied the angry face opposite.

"Made another mistake, haven't you, lieutenant?"

"What's that?"

"Well, you seem to have overlooked that these are territorial waters of San Salvador. We're both here on sufferance and you can't arrest anybody on their lawful occasions within three miles of the shore."

The officer's reddish face flushed crimson. His temper was unruly in the mornings.

"I know that perfectly well. I can wait outside for you."

"So long as you're not in any hurry, it's all right with me. I'm probably staying another week or so. The fishing's good here, they say."

Davis rose to his feet and the flush was still there.

"We'll see who is the cleverer, Captain."

"I'm sure we shall, mister. Especially if you go ahead into that boom."

Davis clenched his hands in rage at the cool, bantering tone.

"Smith is in there, unlawfully raising gold? You admit that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then, I'm going in after him. Your story of booms and mines is a load of bunk, designed to keep me out. It wouldn't bluff a child. There's no man living would dare mine a U.S. warship. Why, it's ridiculous and you must be crazy, Todd!"

They walked on to the bridge together and Todd pitched his cigar overboard.

"You heard me warn the officer, Mr. Mayne?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! Cut it out, Todd! I reckon you're in tow with Smith."

The lieutenant took his seat in the launch and a seaman started the motor. Todd picked up his speaking trumpet.

"What's your favourite flowers?" he inquired. No answer was given or expected.

John stared at the long grey hull.

"He's not *really* going through, sir?"

"I think he's fool enough. I rattled him a bit, and of course, from his point of view, the story does sound eyewash. Smith never expected a destroyer and I'll gamble he's at his wits' ends to know what to do about it."

Whatever Smith may have decided they never knew, for the destroyer's anchor came up and she slowly turned to face the lagoon entrance. The next few minutes were amongst the most exciting that John could remember. The *Mona* lay five hundred yards from the entrance, and about two hundred to the left of the opening. Her bridge was full of officers and nobody noticed the heat of the sun. All eyes were on the warship. Her decks were alive with seamen busy with mops and scrubbers, her guns were still muzzled, and for all the preparations that the eye could see, she might have been alone in the Pacific. A knot of officers stood on her navigating bridge, but she lay too far away to hear any orders.

The lookout in the bows was joined by a junior officer, and then they saw a widening area of white foam around her stern as the screws drove her ahead. John felt strangely sad as though watching a dog crossing a motor-infested highway. A puff of grey smoke curled from a funnel and the long, lean shape pointed her nose at the lagoon. There was no sign of activity from the headlands and John assumed that the guards had long since deserted their posts.

"He's taking it gently," remarked Anson.

"About four knots," growled Todd, then savagely flung his hat on the deck. "Of all the obstinate fools that ever went to sea!"

The destroyer was now past them and her bows were in line with the headlands. John gripped the bridge rail and felt slightly sick. Crash! A plume of water shot up in the air and sprayed the destroyer's forecastle. She seemed to shudder and come to a standstill, then slid forward again. Seamen were running forward and they heard the alarm gongs ringing.

"Collision stations—but what a pity—what a fool!"

Fascinated, John heard the Captain speak, but his whole attention was riveted on the tragedy. The destroyer had stopped and then he saw the sea churn madly as she went into reverse. Slowly backing, she withdrew from the entrance, then her anchor roared out.

Todd spat over the ship's side. "Well, gentlemen, that's the end of the first act," he said. "The second part of the programme will follow shortly."

"What happens now?" asked Fraser.

"I should say that the commander now writes out his resignation."

John grinned at the remarks from his seniors.

"Are you thinking of offering assistance, sir?"

"What good would that do, John? Nobody wants to listen to—I told you so."

The *Batswing* now had two boats in the water

and they appeared to be inspecting the damage. There was nothing to be seen from the *Mona*, but doubtless the explosion had caused underwater damage. Fraser and Anson moved off the bridge and John turned to the Captain.

"I'm still puzzled, sir, what made that officer do such an absurd thing."

"Yes, of course, because you're seeing it from your point of view. It's not easy to explain. First of all, the gentleman is very annoyed with me and himself—you heard that. He lacks a sense of humour, I should say. Next, he has under command a spanking warship of some 1,500 tons, armed with the latest guns and equipment. His objective is a scruffy little schooner armed with a machine-gun. Don't you see the psychological aspect? It's like a battleship taking on a destroyer, or a bulldog going for a lapdog."

"I follow that, sir, but why ignore all precautions?"

"Because he thought I should laugh at him, and he couldn't bear the idea. As he said himself, who would dare to mine a warship? The point is that the boom was put there to stop me, not him. If Davis had stopped to sort out Smith's relationship to me, he'd have realised the truth of the boom. Instead of that, he jumped to the conclusion that we were in partnership. Taking his character into consideration, and his red hair, it is quite understandable. It will be difficult for him, though, to explain to his admiral."

Dinner was finished and pipes lit when a seaman reported that a boat from the *Batswing* was coming alongside. Todd reached for his hat and motioned to John to accompany him. They took up the same positions as in the morning; John was on the bridge and Todd and Davis in the chart-house. The lieutenant now bore a very different expression.

"Skipper, I owe you an apology, and I'm man enough to know when I've taken a licking."

"That's all right, and you're not the first young man to make a mistake. If I were you, I should dye that hair."

For three seconds there was an awkward pause and then they both laughed. Todd had challenged a snub, but the officer's good humour had saved the position.

"I wish I'd taken your advice earlier."

"About the hair?"

They both laughed again and then John heard the tinkle of glasses.

"What's your damage?"

"Twelve rivets gone and a plate buckled."

"Hm! You're still sea-worthy?"

"She's making a bit of water, but the pumps can handle that. Trouble is that I daren't use any speed. Ten knots will be my maximum, and, if there's anything of a sea on, not more than five."

"It's a dockyard job, eh?"

"Afraid so, and following that, a court-martial. However, that's my funeral. You know, Todd,

I'm in a bit of trouble with you." Again the glasses tinkled.

"Over my lack of lights?"

"No, we can forget that. It's this way—just before I sailed we picked up a man on a charge, and it turns out that he is one of Smith's crew."

"Go on."

"He told me a story that you picked up a bag of gold from the wreck. Under the circumstances, I shall be faced with the necessity of searching you, and I don't want to do it."

"Why not?"

"Because I've taken rather a liking to you. You were good enough to warn me about the boom, for one thing. You were under no obligation to do so, and the fact that I chose to ignore it doesn't alter the fact. Will you give me your word of honour that you picked up no gold?"

Todd stretched for a fresh cigar and carefully clipped the end before replying.

"You'd rather not, Todd? I understand. I'll give you another break. If I find this gold you'll be in serious trouble with the authorities. Agree?"

"I suppose I should—if there were any."

"If you hand it over, I'll say nothing about it in my report. If I have to search for it, I can't hide the fact. Take your choice."

"It's good of you to put things that way, lieutenant, and I appreciate it; but if you search you'll waste your time. I suppose it would be no good if I said there was no gold aboard?"

The officer stirred uneasily in his chair, and, without seeing, John could guess what he was thinking.

"You've made it rather difficult by your replies, Skipper. I'm afraid I shall have to take a look around."

"Go ahead. Are you ready now?" Todd sounded quite calm at the proposition.

"No, not yet. I want to take my ship inside first. We smashed the boom, or rather, tore it away from its anchorage. There's nothing to stop either of us going in."

"After you, mister, if it's all the same."

Davis laughed at the Captain's caution. "All right. I'll go first."

"Reverting to this morning, lieutenant, you agree that you can't arrest me in territorial waters?"

"That's so."

"Then, I'd be glad if you'd get this searching done before sundown, because I may be leaving later."

"But I thought you liked the fishing round these parts?"

"Yes, but that was before you busted open your bows. I can steam twelve knots."

"I see. You've got me on the hip, Skipper. You reckon that you have the heels of me. Well, it's your round."

"Thanks. Now, if you would accept a little advice from me, you'd run your bow gently on the

sand and drive a few rivets through that plate."

"Hm! That might give me more than twelve knots."

Todd laughed. "I'll take that chance, mister. Besides, I may be gone before you're ready to try your speed."

CHAPTER XII

CAPTAIN TODD HEADS WEST

THAT afternoon the *Batswing* limped into the lagoon with the *Mona* following in her wake. It was a peculiar sensation passing through waters which had recently been mined, and John half-expected to hear a deafening explosion. The *Batswing* made for the further side of the basin and very gently ran her bow on to a soft spit of sand. The *Mona* anchored a hundred yards inside and John turned the telescope on the schooner. From where they had lain outside, only the schooner's masts had been visible, but now the hull came into the eyepiece of the glass. Her decks appeared deserted and there was no sign of diving. A boat sculled from the shore, but he could not distinguish any of the crew.

A working party was already ashore from the destroyer and he heard sounds of hammering. A little later a boat put off and headed for the *Mona*. John called the Captain; then a strange young man, smartly clad in tropical white, came in-board.

"I understand, sir, that I have permission to search your vessel. Would you be good enough to detail an officer to accompany me?"

"Certainly. Mr. Mayne, take Mr.—er——?"

"Loder is the name, sir. Loder."

"Thank you. Go ahead, John, but don't show him where the treasure is hidden."

It was quite two seconds before the joke dawned, but as he led the officer forward the young man realised that his lack of knowledge was a help. Not knowing where the gold was, no unconscious hint could escape him.

"Shall we start with the cable locker and gradually work aft? Take your choice if you've any other ideas."

John's suggestion was accepted and he threw open the hatch. Groping inside, he found a switch and the dark cavern became alight. All that could be seen was hundreds of fathoms of chain cable coiled tier on tier. The ensign looked down, then groaned. The cable was dirty and greasy; the sides of the locker were worse. John glanced at the immaculate uniform beside him.

"Would you care to take off your jacket?" he asked.

The ensign hesitated, then glanced again at the mountain of cable.

"I suppose it wouldn't be under that lot?"

"Well, you never can tell."

"I—er—think we'll leave that for a bit. Shall we explore the fo'c'sle?"

They wandered off and searched through the men's quarters. Next they tried the pantry, and incidentally a packet of raisins, then the store-

rooms, and then the saloon. Captain Todd reclined in a basket chair and enquired the results to date. It was a tiresome job and neither of them enjoyed it. The ensign picked up a cake of soap and tested its weight. John pointed out that they were looking for gold in large quantities, not grains of dust. .

"Don't let Mayne side-track you, and don't forget to look around the bilge keel."

The young officer took the Captain's banter good-naturedly and smiled. His uniform was already showing signs of wear and had lost its original freshness.

The engine-room was their next port of call and Mr. Fraser tried to be helpful in his own way. He insisted on the officer examining small boxes of split pins, washers and screws, then suggested that the bulkheads should be tapped with a hammer to see if there was a hollow space behind them. His crowning glory was the tail shaft. The drive to the propellers ran through a tunnel just large enough to accept a man's body, and, in spite of Mr. Fraser's standards of cleanliness, was spattered with oil thrown off the shafts.

Dungarees were offered and the ensign was made to crawl the length of the tunnel and back. His face, hands and shoes were filthy on his emergence and John hid a grin. For another hour the search continued and then the American confessed defeat. He admitted that the *Mona's* officers had been helpful, too helpful, and that the gold might

still be hidden somewhere aboard. To John's query what he proposed to do next, he whispered that the confounded gold could stay wherever it lay.

The afternoon was waning when the ensign returned to the destroyer, accompanied by Todd. The lack of success was reported to his commanding officer, who gave Todd a shrewd appreciative glance.

"Does that give me a clean bill, lieutenant?" asked Todd.

"I suppose it does. Anyway, you've had plenty of opportunity to cache it safely before to-day."

"Sure. So I can leave when I like?"

"You know that I can't stop you, Skipper."

"Ah, but I like to be polite—when I can."

Davis smiled. He was beginning to like Todd.

"Say, Skipper, how about coming across to the schooner with me? You know Smith by sight and can identify him. What do you say?"

"I've no objection, mister. Going now?"

"Yes. I'll put him under arrest before it gets dark."

The launch was manned by seamen with revolvers strapped to the waist and they chugged across to the ship. Smith greeted them from the gangway as though they were the best of friends. The man's composure and audacity were astounding. The lieutenant, Todd, a petty officer and three seamen went aboard, and

the commander of the destroyer charged Smith with a list of crimes. The man smiled, shrugged his shoulders, then apologised for the boom.

"You're a cool customer, Smith, and I should keep your apologies for the judge," said Davis.

"I wished to explain that it was accidental, since I have no grudge against the U.S. Navy. Had you waited outside for just a little longer, I was preparing to remove the boom."

"That's as maybe. Meantime, you're under arrest and I'm leaving a petty officer and three men in charge."

"Does that mean that we are all to be shackled in irons?" asked Smith ironically.

"No. It simply means that the petty officer is in command and you will carry out his orders. That's all, and see there's no funny business, Smith."

The Mexican spread his hands in a hopeless gesture as though the idea pained. Todd took the officer aside.

"Are you leaving the gold aboard?" he asked.

"Why not? The ship's under arrest and everything in it."

"Just as you like." It was not Todd's responsibility so he let the matter drop. The launch took them back to the destroyer and he accepted an invitation to dinner. The meal was well cooked and a change from the *Mona's* food. He devoured a mountain of ice-cream, then lit a cigar. His host

had dropped convention and made himself comfortable in shirt-sleeves and slippers.

"How are the repairs coming along?" inquired the Captain.

"Not very well. The plates are too thick to do much with. We haven't the tackle to pull them together. Still, provided the weather remains reasonable we shall manage, and, of course, the fore compartment is bulkheaded off."

"How long have you been in destroyers?"

Davis puffed a cloud of smoke. He was enjoying his company.

"This is my first command. I've just done three years in a battle waggon."

"If you don't mind me saying so," went on Todd, "I think you under-rate Smith. He's a tough, a pirate--anything you like."

"Yes, until I arrested him."

Todd shook his head. "You don't understand. Smith made no objection to being arrested. He could have said that *I'd* put the boom there; he could have said *you* came in at your own risk. Don't you see, he took it all so calmly."

"I don't know what you're getting at, Todd. What else could he do? What can he do now? There's four of my men on board. What's bothering you? Too much ice-cream?" They laughed and Todd saw that their viewpoints were widely separated.

"Do you ever go to the movies? Have you ever seen gangsters beat up the cops?"

Davis roared with laughter at the thought and considered Todd a humorist.

"What a man you are, Todd! Are you trying to scare me? Don't you see that the U.S. Navy has arrested that little tin-pot schooner? I could blow her out of the water with one shell."

"I don't doubt that. You reckon, then, that Smith has given up completely?"

Davis reflected for a moment then stared idly round his cabin. His eye caught sight of a photograph of a battle squadron steaming in line abreast with their guns firing.

"Sure he has. He's tied hand and foot."

"All right, then I'll have a final drink before I say good night."

They shook hands and Todd was motored across to his ship. Fraser was smoking in the darkness as the Captain came up the ladder.

"You want main steam in the morning?" asked the engineer.

"Yes, we're going back to Panama."

"So the adventure is finished, eh?"

Todd looked over the rail at the destroyer's lights.

"Don't make any mistake, Angus. That lieutenant is heading right slap into another bother. I fancy he'll be taking off his uniform for the last time in a day or so."

"Smith is going to wriggle?"

"Like a serpent, Angus. He's half a million

in gold on that hooker and four Navy men keeping him from it. What would you expect?"

Mr. Fraser spat carefully over the rail while he considered the point.

"What about yon destroyer?"

"She can make ten knots at the best and Smith knows that by now. The first night out the schooner will be missing. It's so obvious to me, and yet that young fellow can't see it. It's exactly the same complex that caused him to rush the boom."

"He hasn't so tortuous a mind as you have."

"Huh! If you ask me, his mother frightened him with a policeman when he was a small boy. Smith's not bothered with Uncle Sam when he's got the whole world to run to. What's a few more lives to him? The men that Davis put aboard will be tied up neatly like parcels when Smith is ready to move."

"What are we going to do?" Fraser spoke quietly.

"Don't know. I'm sorry for that young fellow. He's treated us very well over the search."

"Best thing is to sleep on it."

"Right, Angus. Let's get below."

Morning dawned as calm and as peaceful as the previous day. Not a cloud was visible and the lagoon was unrippled. Steam rose from the *Mona's* funnel and her anchor was hove short. A signal

was flying from the *Batswing* and John saw the crew of the schooner scurrying about her deck. Presumably, he thought, the flotilla would be leaving together.

Captain Todd came up the bridge ladder and John touched his helmet.

"Glorious morning, sir?"

"Hm! Looks all right, but the glass is falling rapidly. Get forward and see to the anchor. I'm going out before the wind works up."

A few minutes later the *Mona* swung round on one screw, then headed out to sea. Watching from the bridge, John saw the destroyer come out, followed by the schooner.

"She's going to blow from the north, I think. Anyway, we'll head north and see what happens. Half-ahead, mister."

John pushed forward the indicators and listened to the clanging of the bell. Lieutenant Davis evidently approved of the *Mona's* course, since he ordered the schooner to follow in her wake while he brought up the rear. There was no breeze and the schooner's mainsail flapped noisily while she chugged along on her auxiliary.

Leaning his back against the chart-house, Todd surveyed the squadron.

"If I were in charge, I should have that sail taken in. If we strike a norther, she'll have to go on the port tack and that will bring the seas on the *Batswing's* port bow. Well, it's his business, not mine."

"Maybe he doesn't understand much about sail, sir?"

"Perhaps not, but he should know enough for that."

As Todd spoke, the sky showed a dark line to the north and the destroyer was seen to signal. Seamen could be seen taking in the heavy sail and the air felt as though it was charged with electricity. John mopped his face with a handkerchief and tipped his helmet off his brow. Anson was busy securing all loose gear on deck, and Todd sniffed the air like a bloodhound.

With startling suddenness, a rush of wind swept past them and left them breathing in a vacuum. There was a taste of sulphur in John's mouth and he gripped the wheel harder.

"I don't like it, young man!" growled Todd. "Something is going to hit us in a minute!" The dark line to the northward now changed to a black gathering of cloud, and as they watched a flash of lightning shot down in a zig-zag path to the sea. Seconds later a roar and crash of thunder deafened them. The sun disappeared in a haze and the light failed as though night were approaching. The Captain handed John his oilskins and a quartermaster came on the bridge and took over the wheel. The storm struck them half a point off the starboard bow and the quartermaster turned the ship's bows to the fury.

"Destroyer's turning, sir. She's flying a signal, but I can't read it."

Todd looked at the bunting standing out stiff in the wind.

"He's running for shelter to the Galapagos Islands. Where's the schooner?"

They searched round and saw she was making a wide sweep to starboard. It was difficult to see in the half-light and the sea was flinging spray over their heads. Todd slowed his engines until they just gave steerage way, then sheltered against the chart-house.

The rain fell with equatorial weight and the gale whipped it across the ship like the stream from a hose-pipe. The darkness was riven with vivid flashes and the heavens roared with thunder. Both their late escorts were hidden from sight. The wave-tops were cut off with the strength of the wind and the Captain was forced to ring up further power to hold their head to the gale. For an hour and a half they lay head to the seas, and as conversation implied shouting, little was said beyond the necessary orders.

The rain ceased first and then the wind died down to the strength of a stiff blow. Their bow was now pointing to the west, the storm having swung them through nearly ninety degrees. It was still very dull and visibility was down to a hundred yards. The Captain checked the rising barometer, grunted his approval, then went down to inspect the damage with Anson.

Alone, except for the man at the wheel, John ranged his glass round their limited horizon,

but could see nothing of their escorts. He would have liked to alter course to find the *Batswing*, but could only wait for further orders. Presently Todd returned and announced that their damage was trifling. A boat had been stove in and some barrels washed away, but the ship had suffered no injury.

"I suppose, Mayne, you're wondering the same thing as I am? Where's our friends, eh?"

"I should guess somewhere south of us, sir."

"Probably. The destroyer, almost certainly, but I'm not so sure about Smith."

"You think he's run for it?"

"He had every chance. It was far better for him than mere darkness. He risked nothing from gunfire in that sea, and all that was needed was a few taps on the head for his Navy crew. I wouldn't give much for the guard aboard the schooner just now."

John felt his excitement growing.

The *Mona* turned on her tracks at the Captain's order and drove south at full speed. The dense black smoke changed to pale grey as the forced draught was adjusted and the whole ship vibrated.

"Is there any means of picking her up by wireless?" asked the Captain.

"We don't know her call sign, sir. That will be private."

Neither found it strange that the *Mona* should be wasting time and oil on matters which were not

their concern. It was afternoon when they sighted the destroyer. The sun had returned, and the low shape was travelling slowly towards them. Her bow was low in the water and she looked a little battered. They closed and then a boat sped across to the *Mona*. Rolling in the swell which the storm had kicked up, Lieutenant Davis snatched at the rope-ladder and clambered aboard.

"Have you seen anything of the schooner?" was his first query.

"Not a rag, mister. I reckon they've slung their hook."

"Slung their—?" Davis broke off, then his expression changed. His brows lowered and he ruffled his hair.

"But what about my crew, Todd?"

The Captain picked up a marlinspike and knocked it against the rail. Davis understood, but still hesitated to agree.

"That's what you inferred yesterday?"

"Right, and that's what I think has happened. Work it out for yourself, mister. Smith's desperate and he'll fight like a cornered rat. You've under-rated him from the beginning, and now he's slipped you."

"I can't believe it!" Davis was fighting against his own convictions. Todd, he remembered, had been right about the boom.

"Where do you suggest he's gone, Skipper?" The voice had hardened and his chin stuck out.

"Sit down and look at the chart. I'm proposing

to give you my idea and you can take it or leave it. I know a lot more about human nature than you do, and this is a guessing game. If you guess wrong, you're finished."

"I'm finished already over that boom."

"No, you're not. You and I are the only people who know about my warning. If I hadn't warned you, you'd have smashed up, anyway. If I'm called at the court of inquiry I shall say nothing about it, so you can forget it. Now, as far as the present difficulty is concerned, you've got to find the schooner. You can't talk that away, mister."

"But I must go in for repairs. My bows are as weak as brown paper. That storm frightened me. She had no life and steered like nothing on earth."

"If you give up now, it will smash your career."

Davis shook his head. He dared not risk his ship at sea at anything more than a few knots.

Todd saw his dilemma.

"It looks as though I've got to do it for you," he said.

"Would you? Do you mean that, Skipper?" Davis brightened at the thought.

"Well, normally the proper way would be to wireless your superiors and ask for instructions. That takes time and there isn't any to play with. I'm on the spot. Smith shot my First Mate and he owes me for one or two dirty tricks. I'll make a bargain with you. You authorise me to capture

him and guarantee the oil bill, and I'll do the job."

Davis could see no alternative. His superiors might be annoyed, but at least the gold would be retrieved and his crew saved. If Todd failed, then he was no worse off, for a court-martial seemed inevitable.

"Agreed, Todd, provided you'll take young Loder with you. I must have a Navy representative aboard."

"Sure. He can come as a passenger or supernumerary, but he gives no orders. Those are my terms, and it's up to you."

The officer considered the matter for a while then nodded.

"All right. We'll leave it at that. You take Loder as onlooker, and, no capture, no oil bill."

Todd rammed on his hat and hustled Davis into the waiting boat.

"I'll give that young man time to pack a tooth brush and then I'm off. Smith is travelling at about eight knots."

The launch sped away and five minutes later, was back with Ensign Loder. He stood at attention and gave his new commander a smart salute.

"Reporting aboard for duty, sir."

"Good! You'll rate as Third Officer unofficially while you're aboard. What's that luggage in your hand?"

"The U.S. flag. Lieutenant Davis thought it might be useful."

"Hm! It might, as you say. Mr. Mayne, what the devil are you waiting for? Course is west by south, full speed."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Mr. Anson, I want a man at the masthead all day with a good glass. He's to be relieved every hour. Jump to it!"

Todd entered the chart-house with Loder and they leaned over the chart of the eastern Pacific.

"Now then, Mr. Loder, it's not your headache, but you might as well understand what I'm doing. Smith may be almost anywhere and we have to guess, and guess correctly. I fancy we can rule out North America—that's too dangerous—and I think the same thing applies to Central America."

"Dangerous in that the *Batswing* will have reported him by radio? Yes, I see. Then, that leaves us with South America?"

"I admit the possibility, Loder, but I don't think he will go there. You must remember that he's almost an outlaw now, and as soon as your Navy Department get to work with the radio, he's going to be in trouble wherever he shows himself. South America is too civilised these days for a ship to hide herself. Another point against it is wind and current, and that's important when you've nothing more than sail. He has an auxiliary, admitted, but fuel has to be husbanded against an emergency. The prevailing wind in this sector of the Pacific is north-west, and the south equatorial

current sets westerly. To make for South America against wind and current would be unwise."

"But what does that leave us?"

Todd had discounted all the probables and was left with the vast Pacific.

"It leaves us the west, and that's where he's gone."

"It doesn't sound feasible." Loder peered at the chart showing thousands of square miles coloured blue.

"A current, young man, sets him west at two knots. The prevailing wind is favourable, and he wants to remain hidden for as long as possible. Out there in the blue, he will meet no shipping for days and weeks. He is fully equipped with food and water, remember."

"Yes, but where's he going? He must fetch up somewhere."

Todd stretched his legs then swept his great hand across the chart.

"You're as bad as your boss. Think, man, think! Smith's on the run, a fugitive, and he has half a million to live on when he's clear. There's a hundred places he can live once he has quietly disappeared. If I were in Smith's shoes, I should make for the Marquesas first, sink my ship, and then move quietly amongst the islands until I arrived in Australia or the East Indies. People don't ask a lot of questions around Polynesia."

The young officer sat spell-bound at the story, then looked again at the chart.

"The Marquesas are some three thousand miles away?"

"What does that matter? The further the better for Smith, and all the time the hue and cry is dying down."

There was a look of admiration in Loder's eyes.

"And you're prepared to go all that way on a theory?"

"I reckon to catch him before he gets there. It may sound fantastic, and I admit I need some luck, but I think it can be done. I shall plot his course and daily run on the chart, just as though I were navigating his vessel. Naturally, I shall steam on a great circle course, and at a higher speed than Smith, but with luck I aim to sight him within three days. My main gamble is that he's heading for the Marquesas. Would you care to argue that he's not?"

Captain Todd's expression was serious, but Loder caught the twinkle in his eye. He was saved the trouble of answering by the advent of the Chief Engineer.

"Don't be led astray, laddie. He'll argue all day and half the night."

"And what are you doing up here, Mr. Fraser?"

"I've come up for a wee breath of air and maybe a glass of soda-water."

"Soda-water!" snorted Todd. "The next thing you'll be telling me is that one of your stinking engines has dried up or choked itself, whatever the confounded things suffer from. However, now

that you're here, perhaps you can tell us how much oil is in the bunkers? I'm going to the Marquesas."

Fraser helped himself to one of the Captain's cigars before replying.

"The Marquesas, you say? That's a powerful long way. About three thousand miles?"

"Yes, and some more." The cigar was slowly prepared and a match struck.

"Ay, we can get there, although not at high speed, but we can't get back."

"I didn't ask you if we could get back!" roared Todd to John's amusement on the bridge.

"You can obtain oil at Tahiti, sir," put in Loder.

The Captain silenced him with a glare.

"When I want your advice, Mr. Loder, I'll ask for it."

"You see, laddie, you should never argue with him. It's what I said when I came on the bridge."

The young officer was puzzled. Such things never happened on the well-ordered destroyer.

"Have we sufficient provisions?" asked Fraser.

"Worrying about your oatmeal, eh? Just like a Scot. I don't care whether we've provisions or not. I'm going to the Marquesas." Captain Todd was becoming excited.

"I'll have you know, sir, that my intestines need careful handling. Oatmeal is only one ingredient."

"Yes, and we know what the other is," said

Todd as the siphon squirted. "You get below and pour oil on your engines. Never mind your intestines."

"Sassenach!" Fraser blew his nose and departed with great dignity.

CHAPTER XIII

"THE NAVY WILL BUNGLÉ IT!"

FOR three days the *Mona* drove her bows into the blue Pacific. The weather remained good and a steady breeze varied from west to north-west. It was hot, but beneath the deck awnings the breeze tempered the power of the sun. The ship's speed was held to ten knots, since the saving between that figure and her maximum represented an enormous quantity of oil. A look-out was perched at the masthead and was kept alert by the promise of a good reward if he sighted their objective. Not a trail of smoke nor a shred of canvas had been seen, and the Pacific might have been an empty ocean.

Captain Todd picked up the parallel rulers, measured, grunted, then measured again. A sum was calculated on a piece of paper and a mark made on the chart. John watched with interest over his shoulder.

"There's his course as near as I can guess it, and there's our own." John gazed at the two pencil lines running westerly. "I figure that we are a hundred and twenty miles ahead of Smith, and now I propose making a sweep to left and right of our course."

John was not quite sure of the plan and said so.

"Our visibility is only a circle of a few miles radius," continued the Captain, "and Smith can run parallel to us just over the horizon. I can't plot his exact course. I'm going to zigzag back towards him on twenty-mile legs. I can still miss him even so, but we stand a fair chance."

"And if that fails, sir?"

Todd slanted his jaw up. "In that case we go on."

For twelve hours the *Mona* ran north and south, making a weird track on the chart. Fortunately, the weather was good and they had maximum visibility. Again the Pacific proved empty of shipping. John and Loder were privately agreeing that Todd might have guessed wrong, and that Smith was now ashore in some small South American port. The Captain was unperturbed and ordered the ship back to her course for the Marquesas. The original excitement had died away and life was becoming boring. Work and sleep was the order of the day, with a hand at draughts or chess to while away an hour.

Todd kept his own counsel and became unapproachable. Some of the crew were muttering that a voyage to the South Seas was not in their contract. The Captain said nothing, but noticed everything. The result of the grumbling was seen that afternoon when a mound of rusty chain was broken out of the cable locker and the crew were set to scaling it with hammers.

John and Loder climbed to the tiny platform at

the masthead and wedged themselves as comfortably as the position permitted. Loder swung the glass through half a circle.

"Not a thing—not a smell."

"I suppose we shall be doing this for the next ten or twelve days," grumbled John. "What a life!" .

"Do you know, Mayne, I sometimes wonder whether your skipper is a bit cracked? Fancy steaming all these miles on a hunch!"

"No, he's not cracked, and he doesn't throw away money. You can bet that he's pretty sure of his hunch. He has been at sea longer than us, after all."

They grinned at the thought, then John took the glass. It began to swing, paused, then the glass was polished on a dirty handkerchief and re-focused.

"What is it?" Loder stood up in the vain hope of seeing something miles out of his vision.

"Shut up jogging my arm! There's something out here. Have a look."

The glass changed hands and the ensign gazed at the horizon.

"Yes, there's something white. It could be a sail."

"Deck below!" roared John through cupped hands, unable to wait any longer. "Sail bearing over the starboard quarter!"

Todd shot out of his basket chair and stared in the indicated direction. The bridge telescope was

swung round, then he mopped his face. An order was given and the *Mona* altered course.

Within a quarter of an hour the sail was confirmed and ten minutes later the lines of the schooner were seen.

"Hm! So I was right after all." Todd expanded his chest and smiled happily at the youngsters.

"I owe you an apology, sir. I was quite sure you were wrong."

"Never mind, Loder. You'll grow up one day. Never make the mistake of thinking that the best brains are necessarily decorated with gold lace."

Loder considered the matter for a moment, then decided that maybe Todd was not being personal.

The schooner was closed to a mile and then a rifle pinged. Todd sheered away and took station astern.

"John, fix that rangefinder and keep us at ten cables distance. I'm not risking anybody being plugged by a lucky shot."

"Excuse me sir," put in Loder, "are you going to signal Smith to surrender?"

Todd stared at the young officer, then shook his head sadly.

"My dear boy, you still don't understand. For goodness' sake, come off your battleship. Tell me, why *should* he surrender?"

"Well, if you hoist the U.S. flag, and put me in a boat, I'll go across and board him."

Exasperation and amazement struggled on Todd's face.

"Land sakes! You haven't got your Navy with you. Don't look so glum, I'll fix him. I haven't steamed all this way to wish him good-day. Hello, there's a Morse lamp signalling. What does he say?"

Loder pulled the canvas cover off their lamp and flashed towards the schooner. Contact having been established, he read off the signal. "He says—this is your round, come aboard and talk."

"Oh, does he? Said the spider to the fly. Well, I'm not aiming to put myself in his power, for it's the last you'd see of me. Tell Smith to board me."

The message was flashed back, and then Loder read off the reply. "He says—join forces and take one-third."

Todd grinned and slapped his thigh. "Send this: My name is Todd not Judas. Message ends."

The Morse lamp winked and then, at a sign from the Captain, the cover was replaced.

"We'll waste no more time on that. We can play at that nonsense all day. John, get below with Loder and call the Navy Yard at Panama. Loder will give you the call-sign. Wait a minute. What ships have you got there, mister?"

"When I left there was a cruiser and two destroyers. The rest of the fleet was up north, off the coast of California."

"I see. Then I think you'd better call Lieutenant Davis and tell him we've made contact. Yes, on

second thoughts that will be best, and then he can decide what to do. It's not really my business."

Down in the radio cuddy John switched on his apparatus, then asked at what times the destroyer would be listening.

"There's an operator on all the time," explained Lode.

"Of course. There would be. I forgot that money was no object in the Navy." The call-sign was tapped out and John sat listening.

"Why don't you have something modern? Why not get hold of a radio-telephone set?"

John only grinned at the question. Navy ways bred modern and expensive ideas.

"There she is, my boy, she answers."

Todd's message was transmitted and then they had a long wait while Davis was found. At last the reply came through, their exact position was given, and they were told to stand by for instructions in an hour's time.

The interval was filled in by dinner. The Captain was in pardonable high spirits and had some derogatory remarks to make about naval methods.

"You see, laddie," remarked the Chief Engineer, "Cap'n Todd was once in the Royal Navy, and he can't forget it."

"Mr. Fraser, I'll thank you to pay attention to the eating of your victuals. I was a midshipman for a few months, that's all."

"Ay, and when you smashed two picket boats in a week they decided you were too expensive to keep."

Todd glared across the table at his engineer.

"In the Royal Navy there was once an excellent custom of having a separate mess for engineer officers. The reason speaks for itself."

Nothing abashed, Mr. Fraser chewed his canned mutton and smiled.

"Oh, ay, that was so, Captain, until the Admiralty realised that all the brains were in one mess. However, you'll agree with me that I suggested the Marquesas?"

Captain Todd nearly choked to death, struggling with a potato.

"You heathen Highlander, you never said anything of the sort!"

Loder tried to steer the conversation.

"The Navy should be able to manage this business now, sir. I expect they will send a cruiser."

Todd laid down his knife and fork.

"Let me tell you that the Navy will bungle the business!"

"But why should they, sir?" asked Loder with respect.

"Because they're too dignified to take off their gloves. I don't mean that literally, but they will strangle themselves with red tape. Mr. Fraser, are you willing to gamble two shillings that I have to finish the job?"

"I'm not a betting man, and I don't agree with gambling."

"You old hypocrite! You mean you only gamble on certainties. Right! Time's up. Get along to that radio machine."

The two young officers left the saloon and some minutes later climbed to the bridge.

"Well, what's the news?" asked Todd a little later.

"The cruiser *Vixen* is steaming to our position now, sir. Captain Johnson, the commanding officer, will be in touch with us every hour. His instructions are that we wait for his arrival before taking any action."

Todd was not pleased with the tone of the message, but he realised that he had handed the initiative to the U.S. Navy.

"Captain Johnson, eh? I don't think I know him. Let me see, it's nearly two o'clock, West Pacific time, so he should be up with us by to-morrow night. That means we must pray for good weather. Smith won't get away from me provided it holds, but you can never tell. I think I'll go below for the afternoon and take the bridge to-night."

He checked the position of the schooner then cocked an eye at Loder.

"What sort of man is Johnson?"

"Tall and dark, sir. Comes from Missouri."

"I don't care if he comes from Timbuctoo. I mean, what sort of character is he? Has he ever been known to smile on the bridge?"

Loder grinned and John laughed.

“Oh, I see. Yes—er—I fancy he has a sense of humour.”

“Hm! We shall see. Missouri, eh?” Todd slowly climbed down the ladder, muttering to himself.

The chase was kept in sight all day and, in spite of several attempts by Smith to enter into parley, the *Mona* made no answer. The westerly breeze which had favoured them so long showed signs of fading, and by night fall had dropped to a mere whisper. The Captain came up and relieved Anson, and John, who had slept for a couple of hours, joined him as quartermaster. Fortunately, the night was brilliant and, although the moon was not due to rise until late, hundreds of stars lit the sky and reflected in the sea.

“Do you think he will try a get-away, sir?”

“No hope with this weather. His only chance lies in a hard blow or fog. The latter is remote and the glass is steady enough. I’m wondering what Johnson will make of the business?”

“In what way, sir?”

“It’s not so simple as it looks, John. The whole thing depends on Smith’s character—that is, his reactions to sighting an American cruiser. He’s not sure what my plans are, and probably thinks I’m after the gold.”

“But, surely, he must surrender when the *Vixen* shows over the horizon?”

“Possibly, but not surely. He’s a fly merchant,

is Smith, and he holds one strong card—almost the ace.”

“What’s that?”

“He has the gold, John. Don’t lose sight of that. The Navy are concerned with two things: they want their men back and they want the gold. I’m not certain that they’re particularly interested in Smith. Suppose Smith offers the men and the gold in exchange for his freedom? What happens then?”

“Well—er—I suppose Captain Johnson would accept. You mean, of course, that Smith is not wanted on a criminal charge?”

“As I said in the first place, it’s a complicated affair. There will be the devil to pay in Washington if they lose the gold—that’s a political matter, but the Navy is responsible, and has been ever since Davis made the salvage public. I daresay they would like to bring Smith in as a trophy, but they want the gold first.”

“I don’t see the point, sir. They will have the ship, the crew, the gold, and everything else.”

Todd’s finger poked John in the ribs as he emphasised his point.

“Ah! That remains to be seen. Smith may scuttle the ship.”

“Scuttle! By Jupiter! I hadn’t thought of that.”

“No, and that’s what will happen if the gentleman from Missouri proves too starchy. I can almost see it happening. Smith will drive a hard

bargain and the Navy will look very dignified. All depends on Johnson."

Todd disappeared into the chart-house and left John to ponder his remarks. Now that it was explained he could see the strength of Smith's position. His liberty was worth more than the gold, and the Americans must have that because it was the subject of legal argument in the courts. His admiration for Todd grew as he realised how clearly he had read the position.

The long night passed and the schooner drifted this way, then that. The wind had failed, and Smith was wasting no fuel in attempting an escape from such a speedy ship.

The sky lightened in the east, turned to a rosy pink, then the edge of the sun showed itself. The watch was changed at eight bells and John undressed for a long sleep. Loder reported for duty and the bridge was turned over to his care for the next four hours. Fraser finished his breakfast, walked along the maindeck, then glanced into the radio cuddy. The reception signal was on and he picked up the headphones. Listening for a while, he acknowledged the message, then strolled to the Captain's cabin.

"Morning, Skipper."

"What's wrong with the engines?" inquired Todd, inserting a leg into his pyjamas.

"Nothing."

"Then what are you doing here at this time of day?"

"Sorry if I intrude."

"Can't you see I'm going to bed?"

"Oh, ay. I can see that right well. I've just come from the radio room." Fraser sat down uninvited.

"Radio? Oh, yes, yes. I'd forgotten all about that arrangement."

"Had you now? Well, Captain Johnson is a wee bit angry, it seems from his operator. The man was very terse with his message. He wants our position."

"Oh, does he? Well, you'd better see the watch officer, because I'm going to bed. I haven't time to talk nonsense all night to give practice to a Navy radio operator."

The pyjama jacket was buttoned and the curtains pulled across the porthole. Mr. Fraser sat in the dark.

"The operator said he had been calling all night."

"Poppycock and fiddlesticks! I don't have to play childish games like talking to cruisers all night. Good morning, Mr. Fraser."

"Captain Todd, you're a fine seaman, but you're an obstinate old cuss, and I said good morning ten minutes ago."

"Get out of here before I fire you."

The Chief Engineer made his way to the bridge, checked the ship's position with Loder, and radioed the information. Returning, he pulled his superior's basket chair into a shady spot and lit his pipe.

"You're off duty this watch, sir?" asked Loder.

"Laddie, I'm always *on* duty. I'm the hardest worked engineer at sea."

"Always on duty? Haven't you a Second?" The ensign was horrified at the thought.

"No, there's no Second. I used to have one, but I fired him. I found him using the oil as brilliantine. Terrible waste!"

Loder was not sure whether his leg was being pulled, but Fraser looked very fierce.

"Then, who is in charge below now?"

"I am. Nobody is allowed to touch the engines. My start is very well trained."

"But where do you sleep, sir?"

"I have a wee room opening off the engine-room."

"Good heavens above!"

"No. Below."

Loder was staggered. It was injurious to health and insanitary.

"I suppose the owners will be annoyed at the *Mona's* loss of time?"

"Ay, he's annoyed. I've just left him--the old trout!"

"Captain Todd is the owner?"

"Ay, he holds ninety-five per cent and I hold the rest." Deeply impressed at the information, Loder checked the schooner's position before returning to the attack.

"I've been thinking, sir, that as we're under

orders now from Captain Johnson we should run up the U.S. flag."

"Old Glory is a nice looking ensign, but I shouldn't fly anything without the Skipper's orders—if I were you. Naturally as Watch Officer you'll do as you think fit, and it's not for me to give advice, you understand?"

"You think he might be annoyed, sir?"

"I'd say he would resemble an elephant with a wasp in its trunk. He likes to give orders, except, of course, in my department. I don't allow him down there—often."

Ensign Loder fidgeted at the extraordinary state of affairs which obtained on the *Mona*. There was no set of standing orders such as he was accustomed to, and so much seemed to depend on the Captain's temper of the moment. It would never do for a warship.

"I hope he will hit it off all right with Captain Johnson."

Mr. Fraser rose to spit overboard, then leaned on the rail.

"I'm thinking it will be more important for Johnson to take kindly to Todd."

Shattered at the lack of respect in the engineer's voice, Loder broke off the conversation and idly gazed at the schooner. It was something like a cat and mouse game, since Smith was free in a sense but had no prospect of final escape. The officer mused on while the schooner's sails flapped uselessly in the calm. Forward on the maindeck

the crew wearily chipped away rust from the anchor cables, while one of them entertained his mates with a mouth organ. Loder wondered whether he ought to stop the music, then decided that it was all in keeping with the *Mona*.

CHAPTER XIV

THE ROUND-UP

Two bells in the middle watch had just sounded and the moon was beginning her climb. The calm had lasted all day and into the night. Anson was asleep and Todd was on his bridge with John and Loder. It was not Loder's watch, but he wished to be present when the cruiser showed her lights.

"She should be here by now, sir," said the ensign.

"According to her last radio, she's overdue."

"There she is!" shouted John. "Away over the starboard beam."

Todd glanced in the direction and saw a soft glow of light.

"Well, it might be, and again it might not."

Loder was excited, and the Captain's grudging admission irked. The *Mona* showed nothing but navigation lights and the schooner was picked out only by starlight. The glow from the cruiser rapidly increased as she neared her objective.

"Give her a flash, John." The Morse lamp winked across the sea and in return came the beam of a searchlight.

"That's right," grumbled Todd. "Let's have everything. I don't hear the band playing, Mr. Loder. Huh! She looks like a Mississippi steamboat."

The young officer wisely made no reply while John grinned in the darkness at his discomfort.

"Switch on decklights and drop a ladder.

"Cruiser signalling, sir. Asks for Captain to come aboard."

Todd was enjoying himself hugely and snorted at Loder's words.

"Sorry, young man, but I can't leave the bridge. Ask Captain Johnson to come and have a drink."

John heard Loder gasp at the flagrant disrespect and stifled a chuckle. Captain Todd was master of his ship and could do as he wished. Reluctantly, Loder flashed the signal and hoped Johnson would never find out who sent it. The *Vixen* had stopped her engines and the great bulk lay half a mile on the *Mona's* starboard beam. A boat was lowered from her davits and they heard the sound of a petrol engine.

"Mr. Loder, will you do the honours with me? John, take over for a few minutes while I meet Captain Johnson."

The two white-clad officers stood by the companion ladder and smartly saluted as the cruiser's captain stepped inboard.

"Captain Johnson, sir, of the *Vixen*."

"My name's Todd. Sorry to have dragged you all this way from Panama."

The two shook hands.

"I've never met you before, Cap'n Todd, but I know of you well enough. Your reputation runs north of Seattle and south of Chile."

Todd purred at the compliment and led the way to the chart-house. Walking strictly at attention, Ensign Loder brought up the rear.

"That will be the schooner away to port, I presume?"

"That's her." Todd was busy with glasses and ice.

"I think I've heard most of the story from Davis. I had a long talk with him over the radio. This Smith is a slippery customer, but his number's up now."

Todd laughed and settled into his chair with a glass.

"I'd say that Smith is having an epileptic fit at the present moment. He had no idea you were coming."

"Yes, I expect he's feeling a bit sorry for himself. This job will land him with about seven years. I shall lie-to for the night and send an officer aboard in the morning."

Todd studied the man from the depths of his basket chair.

"Ah! I wouldn't do that, sir."

Johnson regarded his host in turn. He knew more of Todd than was thought, and his respect

for the man was high. He turned to his junior officer standing by the chart table.

"Loder, wait outside. Now then, Todd, let's have it. What's the trouble?"

"If you put a foot wrong, sir, Smith will scuttle and you lose the gold. There's your trouble."

Johnson looked at the shaded electric bulb, then closed his eyes.

"I see. Smith has nothing to lose—in that respect. Either I take the gold or he sends it to the bottom. He loses it either way, no doubt about that. Yes, I see the point, Skipper. What do you suggest?"

"I think you'll receive a flag of truce tonight and an offer of the gold if you'll give him his freedom. The *Batswing's* crew will probably be handed over as a mark of good faith."

Again the cruiser captain studied the bulb.

"Todd, I can tell by the way you've opened this talk that you've some scheme on foot. Officially, I may not be able to agree with it, but, at the same time, I'm darned sure it will work. Let's have it."

"Hm, hm! When I heard you were from Missouri, I had some doubts, but apparently your gold lace hasn't dazzled you."

Johnson stood up and removed his uniform jacket.

"It is rather warm in here, Todd. Let's have it."

"Ha-ha! Excuse me, but I'd like Master Loder

to see you now. You know, I've pulled that boy's leg quite a bit lately. Regarding Smith, I've no scheme—in fact, since you've fallen in with my idea——”

“Hey, wait a minute, Todd. I'm not committed yet.”

“You will be when you hear how simple it is. Accept Smith's offer, take the gold, and steam off.”

Johnson picked up another piece of ice and dropped it in his glass.

“That's not all, is it?”

“Nearly. Oh, I forgot one thing. Take all his firearms away before you leave.”

“Why?” asked Johnson.

“Do you have to know why?”

“Well, I've taken off the gold lace. Don't you think I should know?”

“I'd like it better if you didn't. You see, you will give Smith his freedom in exchange for the gold, and then you clear off. That leaves me. I have a score to settle with him and I propose to turn him over to the civil police at Panama. You will understand now why it would have been better not to know.”

Johnson considered his position for a long time. He liked the idea of handing Smith over to the police, but his honour was concerned in pledging Smith his freedom.

“I'll do it on one condition.”

“Conditions?” Todd flared up. “You're in no

position to make conditions. It's the only way to catch him and the gold as well, and you know it. I can do as I like with Smith when you've gone."

"But I might leave him firearms. It's a dirty trick, Todd. I promise not to arrest him, take away his arms, and then you pounce. It leaves a nasty taste in the mouth."

"If it's a dirty trick, he's a dirty dog. He shot my First Officer. If you leave him armed, I'll publish the whole story in the New York press. It won't read very well, Johnson."

Todd was proving more difficult than the other had expected, but he must stick to his point of honour.

"You wouldn't do that, Todd. That's not your way of doing business."

"Don't soft-soap me. Do I have Smith or not?"

"We're going round in circles. If I leave him armed, that is, with a fighting chance, you'll go in finally and take him. Don't shake your head—that's your character. You're a fighter, Todd. There will be a battle and somebody will get shot. Now listen to my proposition: I'll take away his arms and yours as well."

It was Todd's turn to take stock of the position and he sank low in his chair. Finally his frown cleared and a smile broke through.

"All right. I agree and Fraser shall lead the boarding party. You haven't met my engineer. He's a dead shot with a two-inch spanner."

"That's fine! We'll leave it at that, and now I'll resume the gold lace."

Todd helped Johnson on with his coat, then watched the boat cross to the cruiser. For the next half-hour he stood by John and Loder, quietly chuckling to himself. A boat crossed from the schooner to the cruiser and the chuckles continued. Neither of the junior officers cared to ask the reason and none was offered. All three vessels lay in the moonlight and the cruiser blazed with electric light. The boat returned to the schooner and then the cruiser signalled.

"What—more conferences?" growled Todd as he read the message. "You'd better come with me, John. What's wrong now?"

They were met at the side by an officer and John was taken to the gunroom mess while Todd joined Johnson in his day cabin. It was quietly furnished and resembled a business office.

"I see your coat's off again," remarked the Captain.

"Yes. I'm not sure whether it should be or not."

Todd accepted a cigar and made himself comfortable.

"Well, I've seen Smith and everything went as you said. The gold is coming over in the morning, and then I'm taking his arms."

"He doesn't know about that yet?"

"No, and, of course, I daren't mention the subject until I've got the gold. I asked you to come

over to discuss that point. Smith says *you've* got some of it."

"The word of a scoundrel?"

Johnson shrugged. "Agreed, but he wouldn't say that just for fun. There must be something behind it, or else Davis wouldn't have made a search."

"Oh, you know that? Then, you also know that he found nothing?" Todd bit into his cigar.

"That's not all the story, Skipper."

"I'll tell you something and that must be enough. I was in the lagoon, fishing for the gold, Smith saw something come up, and assumed it *was* gold."

"And was it?"

"I'm not saying anything more. If you want to search me, go ahead."

Johnson knew he was beaten. If Todd stuck to his silence, there was no way of making him talk. On the other hand, Washington would require an explanation of the missing treasure.

"I can only assume you have it."

"Look here, Johnson. I've been put to a lot of expense. You come on the scene at the end—you never located the stuff, never dived for it, never fought for it. You're nothing but the policeman tidying up the loose ends."

"I represent the government of the United States."

"You can represent who you like, but you can't touch me. The Pacific is a free ocean."

Johnson smiled engagingly. "It won't do, Todd."

"Oh, won't it? I don't care for your cruiser, or your battle fleet. You can't browbeat me, and you haven't an iota of evidence against me." Todd stood up and hammered his fist on the table.

"Don't get excited. Sit down. I don't wish to quarrel and I see your point of view, but I am a Naval officer. Davis told me the whole story, including your generous offer of covering up his fun and games with the boom. That was what I should expect from you, Todd, and I appreciate the sentiment. What you don't understand is Naval discipline and tradition. Davis told me the truth and will stand his court-martial. Now, although I agree privately with your viewpoint over the gold, I can't let you get away with it."

"That gold was Japanese and on the sea bed. I'm not robbing anybody." Todd was in fighting mood.

"Agreed. As man to man, I'd do the same thing in your place, but you see, I'm the policeman." Johnson pointed to the gold bars on his jacket.

"I wish you good morning." Todd picked up his battered uniform cap and opened the door. Johnson picked up a pen and wrote his report. He had done his duty and had questioned Captain Todd. Result—nil.

Early morning saw great activity. The *Vixen*

had four boats in the water and they ferried back and forth to the schooner. Todd watched from his bridge, but he was not in such good spirits as he had been previously. The talk with Johnson rankled and he had little to say. At noon an officer arrived and collected all the firearms and then presented Todd with a document which needed his signature. It was a statement that all arms had been handed over.

"Huh! So he doesn't trust me? He needs confirmation over my signature? Oh, well, I suppose the Navy is the Navy."

The boat returned to the cruiser, was hoisted in, and then the *Vixen* dipped her ensign in salute. The *Mona* replied, and the warship moved slowly ahead.

"I wonder why *Vixen* left me aboard, sir?" inquired Loder, dropping his hand from the salute as the cruiser steamed away.

"I don't know. In fact, there's several things I don't know. Mr. Anson, send all hands to dinner and tell 'em to eat well as there are going to be fireworks later."

"Fireworks, sir?"

"I'm boarding the schooner as soon as dinner's over. You can pass the word round."

The ship hummed above and below decks as the news flew from mouth to mouth. Loder took John aside and asked him what he should do.

"I'd like to join in, but I'm doubtful of my position."

"I should be inclined to keep out of the way. You're not really a member of the crew."

Captain Todd finally disposed of the young man's qualms by giving him charge of the ship while the fight was in progress.

As the cruiser dropped lower over the horizon, Smith could be seen lying in a chair on the schooner's deck. He had no idea what was being planned and felt quite secure with Captain Johnson's agreement. His first intimation of trouble was the sight of the *Mona* a hundred yards from his stern. He still thought his safety was assured until he realised that the ship was running dangerously close. Todd had planned nothing beyond a bare-faced attack by boarders, but Smith's complacency played his hand for him. There was no time to organise a defence. Grapnels held the ships together, and Fraser, with most of the engine-room staff, were leaping on to his foredeck. A few men answered Smith's shouts, but were struck down by Todd's rush on the afterdeck. With Smith's capture the struggle was over in three minutes.

Todd wiped his hands and looked round. Smith was bound with rope, and Juan, his second in command, was lying on the deck, recovering from a fierce upper-cut.

"I must say I'm a wee bit disappointed."

"I thought you were a man of peace, Fraser?"

Smith had a lot to say, most of it unfit for delicate ears, and Fraser pushed a rag in his open mouth.

"Mr. Anson, you'll take charge of this hooker and I'll swap six of his crew for six of ours," ordered Todd. "If you have any trouble fly a signal and I'll bear down. I don't think you will since I shall take Smith and his friend along with me."

"What about sailing, sir? He hasn't much fuel."

"I'll tow you until we raise a breeze. John, break out a hawser, and look lively!"

The convoy started that afternoon on its long trip back to Panama. Smith was locked securely in one of the cabins and was threatened with painful penalties if he misbehaved. John was feeling sad that the adventure was finished, and that a few days would see them tied up at a Panamanian quay.

"What will happen to Lieutenant Davis?" asked Todd of Loder.

"He'll lose his ship, sir. I can't see anything less than that."

"Hm! That comes of having red hair. You know, I rather took to Johnson. Put him in command of a freighter and he'd be quite a decent fellow."

Loder shuffled his feet at the thought.

"I don't suppose he'll worry us any more," said John.

"I wouldn't be too certain about that. Johnson has a touch of the bulldog about him," said Todd, frowning at the idea.

The *Monia* picked up her pilot and entered the harbour of Panama once again. The last lap of the voyage had been dull but restful, and John was almost glad to see land again. The pilot had just left the ship when a Naval picket boat came alongside with a rush and summoned the Captain.

"Orders from the Navy Yard, sir. Will you kindly pay the commanding officer a visit at your convenience?"

"There, that's done it! I knew Johnson would land me in trouble. Never trust a man from Missouri, John."

"That means a thorough search, sir, and away goes the gold."

Todd looked at his junior, then laughed.

"They don't catch me as easily as that. There is no gold."

"What?"

"Not on board. It's safely cached with M'Ginty."

"So Davis made his search for nothing?"

Todd laughed again and called away a boat to take him to the Navy Yard.

Landing at the steps, he was directed by a marine to a long, white building. His name was taken and an orderly escorted him through a corridor. The door was opened and Captain Johnson rose and offered his hand.

"Welcome back, Captain Todd. May I introduce Rear-Admiral Kennedy?"

Todd glanced at the blue eyes and grey hair.

"Take a seat, Captain Todd, and help yourself to a smoke."

Uneasily he did as bade and reflected that Irish-America might be worse than Missouri.

"We're considerably in your debt, Captain, and Uncle Sam likes to play fair," said Kennedy.

"Huh!" Todd was not committing himself.

"In order of events, you tried to save one of my young men from crashing open his bows, then you located some gold in which we have an interest, next you trailed and found the scoundrel who escaped with it, and lastly I believe you've arrested the man. Were you in the Navy, I've no doubt you'd receive a medal."

"Huh!"

The Admiral's blue eyes twinkled.

"However, I don't think you want a medal. Instead, I have obtained permission from the Navy Department to pay you an agreed sum for your services. What do you say to two hundred thousand dollars?"

Todd said nothing. There was certainly more to come. It was a higher figure than normal salvage rates, but the operation had been far from normal.

"There's one point, sir," put in Johnson, "that you should make clear. The salvage money is in respect of the *whole* shipment of gold."

"Ah!" said Todd.

"Ah!" said Johnson.

"Would you care to gamble that you can find it?" Todd was determined to have the last word.

Johnson smiled.

"Todd, I wouldn't gamble on anything with you."

"All right then, it's a deal!"